

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. Name of Property

Historic Name: Plaza Theater  
Other name/site number: Vernon Plaza Theater  
Name of related multiple property listing: NA

2. Location

Street & number: 1701-1717 Cumberland Street  
City or town: Vernon State: Texas County: Wilbarger Zip Code: 76384  
Not for publication: ☐ Vicinity: ☐


3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this  
(☒ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility) meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National  
Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the  
property (☒ meets ☐ does not meet) the National Register criteria.

I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following levels of significance:

☐ national ☐ statewide ☒ local

Applicable National Register Criteria: ☒ A ☐ B ☒ C ☐ D

  
Signature of certifying official / Title State Historic Preservation Officer  
Date 8/21/23  
Texas Historical Commission  
State or Federal agency / bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property ☒ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency / bureau or Tribal Government

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

- ☐ entered in the National Register  
☐ determined eligible for the National Register  
☐ determined not eligible for the National Register.  
☐ removed from the National Register  
☐ other, explain: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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## 5. Classification

**Ownership of Property:** Private

**Category of Property:** Building

### Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing	
2	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
2	0	total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: NA

## 6. Function or Use

**Historic Functions:** RECREATION AND CULTURE = theater/movie theater  
COMMERCE/TRADE = specialty store

**Current Functions:** RECREATION AND CULTURE = theater/movie theater  
COMMERCE/TRADE = specialty store

## 7. Description

**Architectural Classification:** MODERN MOVEMENT/Postwar Moderne

**Principal Exterior Materials:** BRICK, CONCRETE, GLASS, TILE

**Narrative Description** (see continuation sheets 7 through 14)

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## 8. Statement of Significance

**Applicable National Register Criteria:** A, C

**Criteria Considerations:** NA

**Areas of Significance:** Entertainment and Recreation, Architecture

**Period of Significance:** 1953–1973

**Significant Dates:** 1953

**Significant Person** (only if criterion b is marked): NA

**Cultural Affiliation** (only if criterion d is marked): NA

**Architect/Builder:** Jack M. Corgan, architect; Interstate Theatres, Inc., contractors

**Narrative Statement of Significance** (see continuation sheets 15-28)

## 9. Major Bibliographic References

**Bibliography** (see continuation sheets 29-36)

**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

**Primary location of additional data:**

- ☒ State historic preservation office (*Texas Historical Commission, Austin*)
- ☐ Other state agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☐ Local government
- ☐ University
- ☒ Other -- Specify Repository: The Dallas Public Library Archive- Interstate Theatre Collection

**Historic Resources Survey Number** (if assigned): NA

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## 10. Geographical Data

**Acreage of Property:** 0.309 acres

### Coordinates

#### Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: NA

Lat: 34.153314° Long: -99.282968°

**Verbal Boundary Description:** Block 15, Lots 3–8, Original Town of Vernon, Texas.

**Boundary Justification:** The nominated property includes the parcels on which the theater and attached 1-story commercial block were built.

## 11. Form Prepared By (with assistance from NR Coordinator Gregory Smith)

Name/title: Jennifer Beggs, Associate, with Steph McDougal, Principal Consultant

Organization: McDoux Preservation LLC

Street & number: 18214 Upper Bay Road #58114

City or Town: Houston State: TX Zip Code: 77058

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Date: November 15, 2022

## Additional Documentation

**Maps** (see continuation sheets 37-46)

**Additional items** (see continuation sheets 47-58)

**Photographs** (see continuation sheets 59-92)

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.



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## Photograph Log

### Plaza Theater

1717 Cumberland Street, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

Photographed by Steph McDougal, McDoux Preservation LLC, November 2021.

All photos reflect the appearance of the building at the time of the nomination's submission to the NPS.

#### Photo 1

West (Front façade) elevation. Camera facing east.

#### Photo 2

Marquee and entrance, camera facing northeast.

#### Photo 3

Theater corner detail, camera facing south.

#### Photo 4

Streetscape with Plaza Theater, corner of Cumberland St. and Wilbarger St., camera facing northeast.

#### Photo 5

West (Front façade) and south elevations. Camera facing northeast.

#### Photo 6

South and east elevations. Camera facing north.

#### Photo 7

South and east elevations. Camera facing northwest.

#### Photo 8

East elevation, camera facing southwest.

#### Photo 9

North elevation, camera facing southwest, includes north elevation of commercial block.

#### Photo 10

Attached commercial block, north elevation, camera facing south.

#### Photo 11

Commercial block northwest corner, camera facing southeast.

#### Photo 12

Commercial block, 1711 and 1713 Cumberland Street, camera facing southeast.

#### Photo 13

Commercial block, 1711 & 1713 Cumberland Street with Plaza front façade, camera facing southeast.

#### Photo 14

Commercial block with section of Plaza marquee and tower, camera facing northeast.

#### Photo 15

Ticket window, camera facing northeast.

#### Photo 16

Front façade tile detail, camera facing east.

#### Photo 17

Lobby, concession stand, camera facing northeast.

#### Photo 18

Lobby, concession stand front view, camera facing east.

#### Photo 19

Lobby facing main entrance and exit doors, camera facing west.

#### Photo 20

Concession stand detail, camera facing east.

#### Photo 21

Auditorium east, camera facing direction north.

#### Photo 22

Auditorium west, camera facing direction north.

#### Photo 23

Cry room sign, camera facing east.

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**Photo 24**

Cry room, camera facing northeast.

**Photo 25**

East exit doors, auditorium lobby, camera facing east.

**Photo 26**

Theater stairway to second floor, camera facing east.

**Photo 27**

Under the staircase, marquee letter storage, camera facing northwest.

**Photo 28**

Theater second floor office, camera facing northeast.

**Photo 29**

Theater second floor library, camera facing north.

**Photo 30**

Projection equipment in auditorium lobby, camera facing southeast.

**Photo 31**

Theater digital projector, camera facing northeast.

**Photo 32**

Theater projection room detail, camera facing south.

**Photo 33**

Second floor residence living room, camera facing southeast.

**Photo 34**

Streetscape, Wilbarger County Courthouse facing the Plaza Theater across Cumberland St., at the intersection of Cumberland St. and Wilbarger St., camera facing north.

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## Description<sup>1</sup>

The 1953 Plaza Theater is a two-story brick Postwar Moderne movie theater with an attached one-story commercial block in Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas. Facing west over Cumberland Street, the building is directly across the street from the Wilbarger County Courthouse. Dallas theater architect Jack Corgan designed the theater and the attached 1-story commercial block as a single project. The theater has an L-shaped plan with a lobby in front and an auditorium at the rear that extends to the north end of the block. The theater's street façade includes a semicircular exterior box office, a magnificent cantilevered triangular marquee topped with the name "Plaza" in neon with incandescent lighting on its underside, and a decorative corner tower rising several feet above the parapet. Terrazzo flooring outside the main entrance of the Plaza continues into the main lobby of the theater, which slopes gently up past the concession stand toward the auditorium lobby. Beyond the lobby, Plaza patrons access the two auditoriums, as well as restrooms and a twelve-seat "cry room." The auditorium seats slope down toward the screens on the north end of the building, the same configuration as in the original single-screen auditorium. The commercial block faces Cumberland Street and fills the area west of the auditorium, resulting in an overall rectangular plan. Glass double doors at the south end of the commercial block, where it connects to the theater, lead to a staircase that accesses second-floor private residential (previously office) space on the building's second floor. Similar materials and design create a visual cohesiveness between the Plaza Theater and the attached one-story retail and offices spaces. Currently in use as a twin cinema, the theater has undergone some interior renovations but maintains its original exterior and many of the character-defining features present during the period of significance. It has served as a vital part of the Vernon community for nearly seven decades, and is nominated to the National Register of Historic Places at the local level of significance under Criterion A for Entertainment/Recreation and under Criterion C for Architecture. The period of significance begins with the building's completion in 1953 and ends in 1973, the current 50-year cutoff.

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Vernon, Texas, the county seat of Wilbarger County, is in northwest Texas, in the Red Prairie ecoregion within the Central Great Plains, just south of the Pease River. Vernon is approximately eight miles south of the Red River, which comprises the border between Oklahoma and Texas; the city is approximately 48 miles northwest of Wichita Falls and 175 miles northwest of Dallas.

Vernon was a regional hub for railroad and highway transportation networks. Historically, Vernon was served by two railroads: the Fort Worth and Denver Railway and the St. Louis, San Francisco and Texas ("Frisco") Railway. The Fort Worth and Denver Railway extended its line through Vernon in 1886,<sup>2</sup> followed by the Frisco in 1901.<sup>3</sup> Today, the Burlington, Northern, and Santa Fe Railroad (BNSF) owns those railroad tracks, which are located just inside the city limits, running east-west on the northeast side of Vernon.

US Highways 70, 183, 283, and 287 all meet in Vernon at an interchange on the northeast side of town, just inside the northernmost city limits between Dean Street and Wright Street. US 283 runs north-south concurrent with Main Street through Vernon; US 70 and US 287 run east-west. US 183 enters Vernon from the east, concurrent with US 70 and US

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<sup>1</sup> Through its period of significance, the Plaza Theater used both accepted spellings of the word *theater/theatre*. Both spellings appear almost interchangeably in advertisements and articles in local Vernon newspapers. Parent company Interstate Theatres' office correspondence most often referred to the theater as "the Plaza in Vernon," also using *Plaza Theatre* in correspondence. In the mid-1970s, the spelling *theatre* became much less prevalent in available sources, and the last use of this spelling in advertisements and local press appears to have been in the late 1970s, with no use of this spelling after this time. The Plaza Theater will be referred to historically as *the Plaza Theater* or *the Plaza*, and the spelling *theater* as a noun will be used throughout this document.

<sup>2</sup> Charles P. Ross, *Early-day History of Wilbarger County*, second edition (Vernon: Vernon Daily Record, 1973), 6. Initial printing 1933.

<sup>3</sup> Charles G. Davis, "Vernon, TX," *Handbook of Texas Online*, tshaonline.org.

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287; it then makes a 90-degree turn, joining US 283, concurrent with Main Street, and runs through the original townsite of Vernon before heading south out of the city.

The Plaza Theater is in the eastern quadrant of the Vernon Central Business District. The original townsite of Vernon consists of approximately 88 blocks, organized along a north-south/east-west grid. At the center of the original townsite, the Wilbarger County Courthouse (1928) occupies Block 4 within a Shelbyville-style courthouse square at the intersection of US Highway 283 and Business Loop US 287, or Main Street and Wilbarger Street. The Plaza Theater, on Block 15, faces the courthouse directly west across Cumberland Street. Wilbarger Street/Business Loop 287 bounds Block 15 to the south; Pease Street runs along the north elevations of the theater and the commercial block constructed by Interstate Theatres at the same time the theater was built. Behind the Plaza, a north-south alley bisects the block along the east elevation of the theater.

Surrounded by one- and two-story buildings, the Plaza Theater occupies most of the western half of Block 15, including Lot 3, the southern portion of Lot 4, and the eastern sections of Lots 5–8 on Cumberland Street. An attached commercial block rests on the northern part of Lot 4 and the western sections of Lots 5–8. The main theater entrance is located mid-block on Cumberland Street. Although no building stands on the south side of the Plaza today, the Buckhorn Service Station and Garage<sup>4</sup> at 1630 Wilbarger Street previously occupied Lots 1 and 2 of Block 15 and shared a first-floor party wall with the Plaza Theater prior to its demolition in 2017.<sup>5</sup>

### Exterior

The Plaza's architectural style is similar to both the Streamline Moderne theaters of the late 1930s and early 1940s and a more restrained Postwar aesthetic that preceded the International Style. While Streamline Moderne theaters featured ornate towers and decorative flourishes, the Plaza features a simple tower that stands out for its asymmetrical placement and materials. This style may be related to wartime shortages; scarce materials, and limitations on new construction, explain why so many "new" theaters during or immediately after World War II were actually remodels of older theaters.<sup>6</sup> Movie theater design in the post-World War II era was also affected by new materials developed during the war and the ascendance of Modernism.<sup>7</sup> Also during that time, movie theaters were becoming more prevalent in the suburbs, rather downtown, where they often served as an anchor in suburban shopping malls, rather than as freestanding structures.<sup>8</sup> The original sketch for the Plaza indicates that the theater itself was originally planned to be a much more cohesive part of the commercial block.

The Plaza Theater building has an inverted L shape, with the front façade at the foot of the L and the rear exit at the top of the stem. Behind a parapet, the building has a flat roof with an exterior gutter system. The Plaza's two-story front façade is in line with the storefronts of the adjacent one-story commercial block along Cumberland Street. The auditorium portion of the two-story theater building wraps behind and is partially visible above the commercial block.

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<sup>4</sup> "Town Crier," *Vernon Daily Record*, February 20, 1977, 2, newspapers.com. Newspaper records have been located for this service station beginning in 1942.

<sup>5</sup> "Historic Building Collapses in Vernon," *KAUZ News Channel 6*, Wichita Falls, TX, July 17, 2017, [www.newschannel6now.com/story/35883212/historical-building-collapses-in-vernon/](http://www.newschannel6now.com/story/35883212/historical-building-collapses-in-vernon/).

<sup>6</sup> Maggie Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk: An Architectural History of the Movie Theatre, Starring S. Charles Lee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 134.

<sup>7</sup> Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk*, 144, 161.

<sup>8</sup> Richard A. Smith, "Abundant Potential for Progress in Shopping Center Theatres," *Box Office Magazine*, July 12, 1965, 60–61, [yumpu.com](http://yumpu.com). Mr. Smith was President of General Cinema Corporation at this time.

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*Theater Front Façade (West Elevation)*

The front façade of the Plaza is two stories tall and three bays wide, with a stacked red Roman-brick decorative tower rising from the left side of the marquee and extending several feet above the parapet at the west elevation. The façade maintains its original design, and exterior materials are almost entirely intact.

At street level, the main entrance consists of three sets of aluminum-framed, single-paned glass double doors topped by mirrored panels, giving the front entrance a sense of depth and reflecting the lights underneath the marquee. The walls beneath the marquee, flanking the entrance doors, are angled toward the sidewalk, where they meet the flat face of the façade. The size of the angled walls and the façade walls below the marquee, and indeed the angles themselves, are asymmetrical, reflecting the interior use behind these small corner spaces: the box office “counting room” on the north side and a storage closet on the south. The angled and façade walls on either side of the main entrance are clad with one-inch tile in a field of beige, with a brown and green ribbon pattern. The semi-circular box office, immediately left of the entrance doors, projects from the angled wall; the upper portion is a semicircular glass column with a ticket window. The lower portion is clad in dark brown one-inch tiles featuring the same ribbon pattern as the adjacent walls, but in beige and green; the darker tile calls attention to the box office while complementing the rest of the entrance. Three movie-poster display boxes flank the entrance: two smaller boxes to the right of the entrance, one on the angled wall and one on the façade wall, connected at the corner, and one larger display box to the left of the box office. Original terrazzo flooring begins outside the main entrance doors and continues throughout the main lobby. A separate entrance to second-floor offices, now a private residence, is located between the theater building and the commercial block. On the southwest corner of the front façade, a vestigial piece of the party wall shared with the previous service station building—a column of yellow brick in a common-bond pattern—remains in place.

The original 1953 marquee is triangular, cantilevered over the main entrance, and extends nearly the entire width of the front façade. The underside of the marquee is illuminated with white bulbs, which also outline the marquee’s vertical glass panels, where changeable letters can be placed to advertise the movie currently on offer. On each side, atop the marquee, semi-script letters spell “Plaza” in green neon within deep, open-faced aluminum channel letters, painted creamy white inside and cherry red outside.

The front façade above the marquee is clad in orange brick laid in common bond; evenly spaced, indented header rows create vertical channels that stretch to the top of the parapet. A modestly decorative tower rises from the midpoint of the left side of the marquee, projecting slightly from the front and side walls of the façade at its northwest corner. The tower is clad with subtly darker reddish-orange Roman bricks in a stacked-bond pattern, contrasting with the brick of the front façade to further emphasize its asymmetry. Six evenly spaced, beveled concrete quoins—each the height of three courses of Roman bricks—wrap around and project from the tower’s northwest corner.

Above the marquee, a ribbon of six aluminum windows stretches from the tower to the second vertical channel in the brick facade. The top of the ribbon of windows is capped by a steel lintel, on which rests a shallow concrete header and, above that, a single course of rowlock bricks. Concrete of the same dimensions also frames the southernmost window on one side and is used in the single sill that runs below the entire ribbon of windows. The windows are separated by wide aluminum mullions; each unit is single-hung, with an operable lower sash that covers the lower third of the upper sash when closed. The visual effect is that of a three-pane window, divided horizontally.

The façade’s parapet is topped with a concrete cap beveled so that the top edge projects just slightly over the bottom. At the corners, the beveled edges meet at an optimistic upward angle. The cap and quoins on the theater tower and the cap atop the parapet of the commercial block also share this design feature, thereby uniting the theater and the adjoining commercial block.

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*Theater North Elevation (over lobby)*

The aluminum-framed single-paned glass double doors to the left of the box office provide access to a staircase that leads to the front portion of the second level of the theater building, which contains an apartment (formerly offices). The first flight of this staircase begins in the adjacent one-story commercial building. To the rear of the stair hall, the second floor of the theater building behind the tower projects slightly over the commercial block. This projecting north elevation is clad in brick laid in a common-bond pattern and punctuated with downspouts.

*Theater South Elevation*

A one-story building on the corner of Cumberland & Wilbarger Streets pre-dated the Plaza Theater;<sup>9</sup> the theater was constructed against and above the previously existing building, creating a partial party wall. During the period of significance, only part of this elevation would have been visible. The adjoining building was demolished in 2017, leaving an unfinished portion of the theater's south elevation (where it was a party wall) now visible. Above that, the wall is relatively featureless, with the exception of three sets of three-window ribbons that provide light to the western half of the second-floor space. Black tar and possible fire damage mar a section of brick below the three sets of windows, above evenly-spaced support columns on this elevation; mortar is also damaged where the adjoining building was removed, and some evidence of water damage is visible, perhaps from an earlier fire. A vestigial piece of the demolished building still remains at street level on the southwest corner of the theater; this partial column is covered in buff brick in a common-bond pattern. Also at that corner, the parapet of the front façade turns the corner for several feet before terminating in line with the first window; beyond that point, the parapet is several feet lower and does not have a concrete cap. A second vestigial piece of the now-demolished adjacent building's wall remains at the southeast corner of this elevation as well.

*Theater East Elevation*

Faced in the same orange common-bond brick as the rest of the theater, this elevation extends to Pease Street. The southern portion of the east wall, behind the lobbies on the first floor of the theater building and the projection booth on the second floor, is slightly taller than the portion of the theater building containing the auditoriums. On the south end of this elevation, a second-floor fire escape door leads to a suspended balcony with extendable ladder. Electrical panels and conduit are affixed to the building at this location. Below a large square second-floor vent, a set of double doors provide an emergency exit from the auditorium lobby. Exterior downspouts extend from collector heads at the parapet to a storm sewer below street level. The building is separated from the east half of Block 15 by an alley.

*Theater and Commercial Block North Elevation*

The primary north elevation of the theater building is two stories tall, reflecting the height of the projection screens inside. It is clad in the same orange brick as the rest of the theater building, laid in a common-bond pattern. At street level, the north end of the theater auditoriums is punctuated by two sets of steel double doors, painted blue with green frames and flush with the wall, at the northeast and northwest corners of the theater building.

Adjoining the theater building, the north elevation of the commercial block is clad with matching orange brick as well as the same red-orange Roman brick used in the theater tower. The Roman brick, in a stacked-bond pattern 18" high, outlines the inset single-entry door at the rear of the commercial block and a small sidewalk-level alcove containing

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<sup>9</sup> Wilbarger County deed records, Vol. 188, 258.

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individual electrical meters for each of the four spaces in the commercial building. The storefront section of the corner space is completely clad with the Roman stacked-bond bricks below a beveled concrete cap, with the orange brick above, topped by another beveled concrete cap. An adjoining pair of large aluminum display windows on the west corner of the north elevation are currently covered with some sort of blackout material on the inside.

*Commercial Block (West Elevation)*

The commercial building is organized into six bays and appears to have originally contained six aluminum window-wall storefronts, four of which appear to be intact. Each storefront is organized into three parts: two single-pane display windows and a single-entry door. The two northernmost storefronts are mirror images of one another, with off-center doorways and brick bulkheads below the windows. The northern of these two storefronts looks to be original, with a fixed-pane transom above the door and a sidelight next to it. The other has been altered to remove the door/transom/sidelight, which has been replaced with a single window; non-matching brick infills the bulkhead in the space previously occupied by the door. The next-most-northerly bay appears to have been infilled and the wall covered with stucco. South of that, three identical storefronts each feature a center single-entry door between two single-pane display windows, with frames that rest directly at sidewalk level; fixed-pane transom windows top the windows and doors.

Surrounding the aluminum window walls of all six bays, Roman brick matching the theater tower is laid in a stacked-bond pattern. Above the original metal and wood awning that shelters all six bays of the commercial building, the parapet is clad with orange brick in a common-bond pattern, matching the other primary brick of the theater building. The underside of the awning is painted orange and banded with tubular metal in green, red, and chrome. The awning extends straight out from the northwest corner of the commercial building and maintains its distance from the facade until just past the middle of the building, when it begins to angle back toward the building, passing above the entrance to the second floor of the Plaza building and ending at the mid-point of the marquee. Four angled pieces of chrome strip lighting, attached to the underside of the awning above the doorway to 1705 Cumberland Street, appear to be original.

On the south end of the commercial block, an aluminum-framed, full-glass double door provides access to a staircase which leads to the front portion of the second floor of the theater building, which now houses an upstairs residence. The first flight of this staircase begins in the commercial block; turning at a landing, the staircase then continues into the Plaza building.

Interstate Theatres built the commercial block concurrently with the Plaza Theater and owned the building during the period of significance. Correspondence from 1957 shows that Interstate unsuccessfully tried to rent this space for years; as a result, there was no impetus to complete the interior of the second-floor space above the lobby.<sup>10</sup> While it is not clear why Corgan changed the design of the commercial block before construction to eliminate the originally planned second floor, Interstate correspondence notes very little demand for office space in Vernon.

**Interior**

*Lobby*

The main entrance of the Plaza leads directly into the terrazzo-floored main lobby, which gently slopes up until leveling off at the original entrance to the auditorium lobby; this inner lobby contains the entrances to restrooms, a “cry room”

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<sup>10</sup> Correspondence of W. E. Mitchell, August 1, 1957, Interstate Theatre Collection, Dallas Public Library.

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where parents could take their noisy children and continue to watch the movie, and the twin auditoriums. While the original doors to the auditorium lobby have been removed, theater patrons still enter through the same spaces as they did when the Plaza had a single auditorium.

The multicolored terrazzo floor in the lobby includes a light gray background accented with geometric patterns in dark gray and orange, as well as orange sections shaped to look like spotlight beams, a pattern also featured on the current Plaza walls, which are painted in red and orange. The “spotlights” in the floor lead forward from the entrance to the concession stand and to the auditorium lobby to the right of the concession stand. In the 1980s, shelving was installed in the lobby for the rental or sale of video cassette tapes, but a 2005 renovation removed the shelving and restored the lobby to its original configuration. That later renovation also removed the south wall of the concession stand,<sup>11</sup> exposing a food-preparation space not previously visible to the public; this rear area has now been painted to complement the rest of the lobby.

*Auditorium Lobby, “Cry Room,” and Restrooms*

The auditorium lobby begins to the right of the concession stand. Just inside the location of the original non-extant doors separating the main lobby from the auditorium lobby, a storage space is located inside a column to the left and an interior stairway to the second floor of the building can be accessed through a single entry door on the right. The auditorium lobby is a relatively large space that provides access to the auditoriums on the left, the men’s and women’s lounges and restrooms on the right, and continuing straight ahead, the “cry room” at the east end of the lobby. Next to the cry room is an exit door that leads to the alley behind the east elevation of the Plaza.

Part of the original Plaza design,<sup>12</sup> the soundproofed cry room—a space for parents with noisy or upset children—was a popular feature in 1950s movie houses.<sup>13</sup> This space is currently not open to the public, as it is not ADA-compliant, and today serves as a storage room for Plaza supplies. The room maintains its original design, which includes the original “cry room” sign over the entrance, 12 seats, a speaker to hear the film, and a window through which adults could continue to watch the movie while tending to children.

The Plaza restrooms are marked with new signs designed in the style of the cry room sign. Original built-in benches are located in the men’s and women’s lounges immediately outside their respective restrooms. The restrooms feature original marble floors, wall tile, and built-in tile trash receptacles between sinks.

*Auditoriums*

The original Plaza auditorium contained 1,200 seats.<sup>14,15</sup> Two aisles separated the 14-seat-wide center section from the seven-seat-wide side sections, all of which occupy a single level with no balcony. The original screen was 37 feet wide by 27 feet tall, with red damask draperies covering the entire proscenium, which extended across the side walls of the auditorium for a distance of about 25 feet. The 1953 design omitted the traditional proscenium arch in order to achieve the

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<sup>11</sup> Oral interview with Stephen Ray and Mark Farr-Nash, in discussion with Jenn Beggs and Steph McDougal, August 11, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> “Modern Theatre to Open in Vernon,” *Wichita Daily Times*, June 28, 1953, 6, newspaperarchive.com.

<sup>13</sup> Nancy Hendricks, *Daily Life in 1950s America*, 188, (United States: ABC-CLIO, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> “Modern Theatre to Open in Vernon,” *Wichita Daily Times*, June 28, 1953, 6, newspaperarchive.com.

<sup>15</sup> “Plaza ‘3-D Theatre’ Opened in Vernon,” *Box Office Magazine*, July 11, 1953, 6, yumpu.com. *Box Office Magazine* reported that the theater had 1,450 seats; this is the only time this number was used in any information located, and looking at photos and research available, this number of seats does not seem possible.



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maximum width at the front of auditorium; this innovation in theater design, which focused on the screen and removed proscenium space, allowed the Plaza to have a larger screen than theaters that preceded it.<sup>16</sup>

In February of 1977, ABC-Interstate Theaters sold the Plaza to James G. Barton, a businessman who had previously managed movie houses for Video Independent Theaters in Lubbock, Texas before moving to Vernon. Mr. Barton stated at the time that the Plaza would be converted to a twin movie house, with two 30-foot wide auditoriums and an automated projection booth.<sup>17</sup> The Plaza Theater currently has two auditoriums, each with 175 audience seats that face north. When the single original theater was divided, the two screens were placed in front of the original screen, into the front seating area; additionally, today's audience seats are larger than the original theater seats, which reduces the number of seats per row. These changes account for the drastic reduction in the total number of seats. The area behind the screens today contains the building's HVAC systems.<sup>18</sup>

Records located show that the Plaza was operating as a twin cinema by February of 1978; an article, explaining that Mr. Barton cancelled an R-rated movie showing at the Plaza, also mentions the twin auditoriums.<sup>19</sup> While an exact date for the opening of the twin cinemas at the Plaza has not been located, Vernon native and current co-owner of the Plaza Steve Ray remembers having seen *Star Wars* in a twin theater at the Plaza;<sup>20</sup> the science fiction epic opened on May 25, 1977.<sup>21</sup> Moviegoers in the twin auditoriums today face north when watching a film, just as they did in 1953.

*Office, Library, Projection Room*

The second floor of the Plaza Theater business space is accessed from the auditorium lobby, via a staircase located to the right of the men's lounge and restroom. These stairs lead to an east-west hallway, at the end of which a narrow emergency exit door leads to the alley behind the Plaza. The hallway is adjacent to the southern exterior wall, so all of the second-floor rooms are on the north side of the hallway. Closest to the staircase is a storage room, where a hole in the wall was broken through by a previous owner to provide access to the second floor residential space.<sup>22</sup> Also on this level are the theater office, projection room, library, and a second storage room. Midway, a short north-south hallway leads to the Plaza's projection room.

The Plaza projection room maintains its original footprint, but does not use its original projection equipment; the theater converted to a digital format in October 2014.<sup>23,24</sup> The room still contains some original equipment and signage, as well as the original projection windows, a container for celluloid film reels, and remnants of the original fire suppression system designed by Jack Corgan.

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<sup>16</sup> "The Proscenium Arch Bows Out to Widescreen," *Box Office Magazine*, July 7, 1956, a special section, *The Modern Theatre*, 12-13, [yumpu.com](http://yumpu.com).

<sup>17</sup> "Plaza Sold; Twin Due," *Vernon Daily Record*, February 17, 1977, 1, [newspapers.com](http://newspapers.com).

<sup>18</sup> Confirmed by current Plaza owner Mark Farr-Nash, and by a site visit in November 2021.

<sup>19</sup> "Town Crier," *Vernon Daily Record*, February 16, 1978, 2, [newspapers.com](http://newspapers.com). Barton cancelled the screening when a Crowell resident objected to the title of the film, "The Happy Hooker Goes to Washington."

<sup>20</sup> Oral interview with Stephen Ray and Mark Farr-Nash, August 11, 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Shawn Robbins, "Celebrating the Star Wars Franchise's Box Office Impact as *The Empire Strikes Back* Turns 40," *Box Office Magazine* archives, May 21, 2020, [boxofficepro.com](http://boxofficepro.com).

<sup>22</sup> Oral interview with Mark Farr-Nash and Stephen Ray, August 11, 2021. This is a narrow pass-through that was built by a previous owner no earlier than 2002.

<sup>23</sup> Lana Sweeten-Schults, "It's lights, camera, action, small-town charm at vintage Plaza Theatre," *Times Record News*, March 13, 2016, [archive.timesrecordnews.com](http://archive.timesrecordnews.com). Converting to digital technology was a great financial burden for small movie theaters; the Plaza utilized a Main Street grant to partially fund their digital equipment.

<sup>24</sup> Leo Barraclough, "Digital Cinema Conversion Nears Endgame," *Variety*, June 23, 2013, [variety.com](http://variety.com).

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*Second-Floor Residential Space*

The second floor residential space, originally planned to be used as an office, was rented out early in the Plaza's history.<sup>25</sup> Some vestigial damage to the floor marks the location of a counter. This space has its own entrance on the west elevation, between the theater's front façade and the storefront at 1713 Cumberland Street. This original glass and aluminum doorway leads to a gray terrazzo-floored hallway facing east, which also provides access to a storage space under the stairs that contains part of the original air conditioning equipment and racks for the changeable letters on the marquee. Two flights of concrete stairs lead to the residential space, which has windows facing west, over the Plaza marquee, and south. Currently the space contains a living area, kitchen, bedroom, and bathroom.

**Integrity**

The Plaza Theater's exterior retains a high degree of integrity and is substantially unchanged from its opening in 1953 through its period of significance. The theater retains integrity of location, setting, design, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association. It remains in its original setting in the center of the original townsite of Vernon, across from the county courthouse. While the City of Vernon has expanded since the Plaza was built, the theater's relationship with the city center has remained the same. The building's design and exterior materials are intact. The theater is a lasting example of the Postwar Moderne style of movie theater, designed by a prominent Texas architect, Jack M. Corgan, who designed scores of indoor and drive-in theaters in the Southwest. While the original single theater was divided into two cinemas after the period of significance, the lobby and other sections of the interior of the theater are intact. The Plaza maintains its relationship in the community of Vernon as a place to see movies, outlasting all other movie theaters built in Vernon during and after the golden age of movie houses. Continuing to serve its community, the Plaza Theater is currently the only operating movie theater within 30 miles of the city.

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<sup>25</sup> Correspondence, Fred Palmer to W. E. Mitchell, December 23, 1958, Interstate Theatre Collection, Dallas Public Library. The floor plan included in this correspondence was being presented to a future tenant who did rent the space; it's not known if these plans were utilized.

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## Statement of Significance

Constructed in 1953, the Plaza Theater in Vernon, Texas, was a state-of-the-art movie house for the Interstate Theatre Co., which at that time was operating more than 100 movie theaters in Texas.<sup>26</sup> Designed by Dallas architect Jack M. Corgan, a pioneer in movie theater design in the Southwest, Interstate's regular contractors built the Plaza. Local Interstate manager Fred Palmer announced plans for the new theater in late 1952, shortly after a fire destroyed the Vernon Theatre, another Interstate movie house in Vernon. At the time, Palmer boasted that the Plaza would have the very latest in equipment and be "the finest and newest in North Texas."<sup>27</sup> While the Vernon Theatre that previously occupied the site included a balcony for the segregation of African American customers, the Plaza had no balcony or separate entrance, which likely indicated that it was a Whites-only establishment. Through at least 1961, it was Interstate Theaters' policy to maintain segregated theaters.<sup>28</sup> When the Plaza opened, the *Wichita Daily Times* in nearby Wichita Falls touted that the theater was "the largest movie house between Fort Worth and Denver."<sup>29</sup> Although that claim cannot be confirmed absolutely, current research shows that the Plaza was slightly larger than all but one of the theaters built only for moviegoing in that region.<sup>30</sup> Technological innovations incorporated into the Plaza included equipment designed for 3-D capability, stereophonic sound, and a larger screen than had been built for any previous Vernon theatres.<sup>31</sup> A lasting example of a Postwar Moderne-style movie theater, the Plaza Theater was built at a time when movie houses in the United States were moving away from downtown and into the suburbs. The movie theater business was also affected by the rising popularity of television and that medium's becoming a significant force in American culture. Interstate Theatres retained its interest in the Plaza through this major cultural shift, not selling the theater until 1977. Prominently located in the center of the original Vernon townsite across from the Wilbarger County Courthouse, the Plaza Theater was a focal point for the local community during its period of significance. Although it was split into a twin cinema in the late 1970s, the Plaza lobby and other interior components are intact, and the exterior maintains its original design and character-defining features. One of the few Jack Corgan-designed movie houses still operating in Texas, the Plaza Theater is nominated to the National Register of Historic Places at the local level of significance under Criterion A in the areas of Entertainment and Recreation. It is also eligible under Criterion C at the local level of significance for Architecture. The Plaza Theater, which retains its inviting 1953 façade, marquee, and signature tower, has transcended its segregated past and today entertains the entire community of Vernon. The period of significance is 1953-1973.

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## A Brief History of Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

The land now known as Wilbarger County was historically occupied by the Tonkawa native peoples and was the occasional hunting grounds to Wanderer Bands of Comanche.<sup>32</sup> Both the Tonkawa and the Comanche were driven out of the area by 1870<sup>33</sup> although, in the 1880s, Comanche-Kiowa tribe members were seen in the territory, crossing over from

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<sup>26</sup> "Film Patrons in Poll Vote on Presidential Candidates," *Wichita Daily Times*, October 5, 1952, 48, newspaperarchive.com.

<sup>27</sup> "Interstate Secures Okay to Construct New Theatre on Properties in Vernon," *Vernon Daily Record*, November 2, 1952, 1.

<sup>28</sup> "Negro Man Falls from Balcony of Theater," *Vernon Daily Record*, February 22, 1951, 1; "Negroes, Whites Protest Segregation at Theaters," *Vernon Daily Record*, February 13, 1961, 2.

<sup>29</sup> "Modern Vernon Theatre to Open," *Wichita Daily Times*, June 28, 1953, 6, newspaperarchive.com.

<sup>30</sup> Research, excluding theaters also used for live performances, identified other movie theaters with more than 1,000 seats in the region, including the La Nora in Pampa, Texas, which opened with 1100 seats in 1930, and the Morley Theatre in Borger, Texas, which was scheduled to have 1250 seats, according to plans announced in 1946. Accounts of the Morley opening in 1947 with 1200 seats have yet to be confirmed.

<sup>31</sup> "Modern Vernon Theatre to Open," *Wichita Daily Times*, June 28, 1953, 6, newspaperarchive.com.

<sup>32</sup> "Tonkawa," Oklahoma Historical Society, okhistory.org. The Tonkawa were forced to the Brazos Reservation by the late 1850s and would eventually be forced to settle in Oklahoma.

<sup>33</sup> John Leffler, "Wilbarger County," *Handbook of Texas Online*, tshaonline.org.

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a reservation in Oklahoma.<sup>34</sup> Settled by White/Anglo people in 1858 and named after Josiah P. and Mathias Wilbarger,<sup>35</sup> Wilbarger County is on the Texas-Oklahoma border, with the Red River comprising its northern boundary. The county seat, Vernon, is located in the Red Prairie ecoregion within the Central Great Plains.<sup>36</sup> The county has altitudes ranging from 1,050 to 1,400 feet above sea level, and its 947 square miles contain soils that support tall grasses and mesquite.<sup>37</sup> Vernon is in the north-central part of the county, and the Pease River flows close by, joining the Red River eight miles northeast of Vernon. Wilbarger County was formally organized in 1881, with Vernon as the county seat and 56 voters in the county.<sup>38</sup>

In the late 1850s, the Tonkawa called the area “Eagle Springs” because of the large number of eagle nests in the area.<sup>39</sup> A town elder who came to Wilbarger County in December 1879 recalled the Vernon area being called Eagle Flat.<sup>40</sup> When the settlement applied for a post office with the name Eagle Flat, however, the application was denied because too many Texas towns already had “Eagle” in their names. The town’s second choice, Vernon, was approved in 1880.<sup>41</sup> The town may be named after George Washington’s Mount Vernon or after a traveling salesman named Vernon Brown.<sup>42</sup> Wilbarger County was organized in October 1881, with Vernon (population 25) selected as the county seat.

The economy of Vernon in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was focused on cattle and corn; settlers also collected coyote hides and buffalo bones to make a living. W.B. Worsham had started the R2 Ranch in 1879, headquartered in Big Spring and also on Wilbarger land; in 1880, the county contained 30 farms or ranches.<sup>43</sup> The Western Trail came through Wilbarger at nearby Doan’s Crossing, a trading post and post office established by 1879. As railroads replaced the trail, Doan’s suffered a steady decline, losing its post office in 1919 after the railroad bypassed the town in favor of Vernon. By the 1930s, the population of Doan’s Crossing had dwindled to ten residents.<sup>44</sup>

In Texas, three railroads were completed and running by the beginning of the Civil War, but the northern part of the state was largely unaffected until almost 1880.<sup>45</sup> In Wilbarger County, the Fort Denver and Denver City Railway reached the east side of the county, via Wichita Falls to Harrold, in 1885. In 1886, the first railroad line reached Vernon,<sup>46</sup> and its population boomed to 2,857 residents by 1890.<sup>47</sup> Chartered in 1873 as the Fort Worth and Denver City Railway Company, the Fort Worth and Denver Railway began construction in 1881. Grenville M. Dodge formed the Texas and Colorado Railway Improvement Company to build the line in exchange for \$20,000 in stock and \$20,000 in bonds for each mile of track laid, starting just north of Fort Worth.<sup>48</sup> When the rail line was extended 31 miles from Harrold to Chillicothe in 1886, it came through Vernon. The rail line continued through New Mexico to Colorado, and service between Fort Worth and Denver started on April 1, 1888. By this time, the Denver, Texas, and Fort Worth Railroad acquired the previous company, and that organization became part of the Union Pacific, Denver, and Gulf Railway in 1890. The railroad’s

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<sup>34</sup> Brian C. Hosmer, “Parker, Quanah,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, tshaonline.org.

<sup>35</sup> Ross, *Early-day History of Wilbarger County*, Introduction, 1.

<sup>36</sup> Glenn Griffith, et al. *Ecoregions of Texas*, Report to Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, December 2007.

<sup>37</sup> Leffler, “Wilbarger County.”

<sup>38</sup> Ross, *Early-day History of Wilbarger County*, 2.

<sup>39</sup> Davis, “Vernon, TX.”

<sup>40</sup> Ross, *Early-day History of Wilbarger County*, 20.

<sup>41</sup> Records of the Post Office Department, 1773–1971, Report of Site locations, Texas: Waller-Wilbarger Counties, Vernon, files 930-931, the National Archives Catalog, catalog.archives.gov.

<sup>42</sup> Davis, “Vernon, TX.”

<sup>43</sup> Leffler, “Wilbarger County.”

<sup>44</sup> Lea Anne Morrell, “Doans, TX,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, tshaonline.org.

<sup>45</sup> Werner, “Railroads.”

<sup>46</sup> William C. Billingsley, “Fort Worth and Denver Railway,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, tshaonline.org.

<sup>47</sup> “Texas Almanac: City Population History from 1850–2000,” *texasalmanac.com*.

<sup>48</sup> Billingsley, “Fort Worth and Denver Railway.”

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influence through the Texas Panhandle and further west is undeniable. Town populations along the rail line boomed, and between 1888 and 1899, the railroad actively promoted immigration.<sup>49</sup> The Wilbarger County Immigration Association held a convention in 1893 at Wilbarger County Courthouse in Vernon, with leaders stating that their previous work had seen “an increase in immigration, and a better class of immigration.”<sup>50</sup> In 1929, the Fort Worth and Denver City Railway had six trains departing every day from Vernon, and the Frisco was making one round-trip a day.<sup>51</sup> The Blackwell, Enid, and Texas Railway Company was chartered in 1901 to build a rail line from Vernon to the Red River, where it connected to the Blackwell, Enid, and Southwestern Railway. This rail line became part of the St. Louis, San Francisco, and Texas Railway, also called the “Frisco,” in 1904; at one point, it served nine states.<sup>52</sup> The Vernon rail line was abandoned in 1957.<sup>53</sup>

When the Good Roads movement spread to the South, its goal was to convince farmers that improved roads benefitted them economically and culturally.<sup>54</sup> The Federal Aid Road Act of 1916 focused on rural post roads; the law made receiving funds contingent on a state having a dedicated highway agency.<sup>55</sup> The Texas Highway Department was created in 1917 and took over highway construction within the state by 1925.<sup>56</sup> Wilbarger County had its own Good Roads Committee, a group that championed a bond act to raise \$600,00 for new road work in late 1921. The group promoted the plan at meetings in area schoolhouses and a large gathering in Vernon’s public square.<sup>57</sup> In 1939, three named highways passed through Vernon: the Colorado-to-Gulf, the North-South, and the Lee Highway. Each of these highways was promoted by an association seeking to further its development.<sup>58</sup> The Lee Highway, called the “Broadway of America” because it traversed the country from east to west, is now US 70 in Texas.<sup>59</sup>

The area’s early prosperity was based on crops like corn, wheat, and cotton and livestock ranching (primarily sheep and cattle). Farmers first planted cotton in the area in the early 1890s, after the failure of wheat crops, and by 1899 Vernon had two cotton gins.<sup>60</sup> After the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, cattle ranching declined as cotton became a more profitable source of income.<sup>61</sup> By 1930, cotton was the dominant crop in the county, with more than 165,000 acres planted on more than 2,130 farms;<sup>62</sup> Vernon had its own cotton oil company through at least 1960.<sup>63</sup> This cotton-based economy likely fueled Vernon’s rapid growth between 1910–1930 and relied upon the African American population in Vernon during the early twentieth century. In 1950, Vernon’s population peaked at 12,684 people, an increase of nearly 37% over the 1940 population, at a time when Wilbarger County’s population remained nearly unchanged, perhaps indicating that people

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<sup>49</sup> Tiffany Marie Haggard Fink, “The Fort Worth and Denver City Railway: Settlement, Development, and Decline on the Texas High Plains,” (PhD diss., Ann Arbor: UMI, 2004), proquest.com.

<sup>50</sup> “At Vernon,” *Fort Worth Daily Gazette*, April 11, 1893, 5, newspapers.com.

<sup>51</sup> “Railroad Time Table,” *Vernon Daily Record*, November 6, 1929, 7, newspapers.com.

<sup>52</sup> “St. Louis-San Francisco Railway,” *The History of BNSF: A legacy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*, 16, bnsf.com.

<sup>53</sup> Chris Cravens, “Blackwell, Enid, and Texas Railway,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, tshaonline.org.

<sup>54</sup> Howard Preston, “Good Roads Movement,” *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 11: Agriculture and Industry*, 83–85. University of North Carolina Press, 2008, www.jstor.org.

<sup>55</sup> Richard F. Weingroff, “Federal Road Act of 1916: Building the Foundation,” *Public Roads*, Vol 60 No 1, Summer 1996, fhwa.org.gov.

<sup>56</sup> John D. Huddleston, “Texas Department of Highway Transportation,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, tshaonline.org.

<sup>57</sup> “Good Roads Bond Election Finds Overwhelming Favor Saturday from Wilbarger County Voters,” *Vernon Daily Record*, November 1, 1921, 1, newspapers.com.

<sup>58</sup> “North-South Highway Association Officials to Meet in Vernon,” *Vernon Daily Record*, May 27, 1939, 1–2, newspapers.com.

<sup>59</sup> Richard F. Weingroff, “Dr. S. M. Johnson - A Dreamer of Dreams,” *Highway History*, fhwa.dot.gov.

<sup>60</sup> Ross, *Early-day History of Wilbarger County*, 38, 95.

<sup>61</sup> Leffler, “Wilbarger County.”

<sup>62</sup> Leffler, “Wilbarger County.”

<sup>63</sup> “New Cotton Plan Topic of Meeting,” *Vernon Daily Record*, August 8, 1960, 1, newspapers.com.

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who had previously lived outside Vernon were moving into the city limits.<sup>64</sup> For most of the second half of the twentieth century, the African American population in Vernon appears to have comprised between 7–10% of the community as a whole. As in most Southern cities, Black residents lived in a mostly segregated neighborhood on the northwest side of Vernon's downtown. The neighborhood's streets included (in 1940): Houston, McKinney, Deaf Smith, Dawson, and Antelope Streets. It was bisected by US highway 70/287.<sup>65</sup> Both adults and children worked in the cotton fields, with Vernon's African American school closing in mid-September each year for the six-week cotton-picking season.<sup>66</sup>

The Great Depression brought significant losses to agriculture and livestock ranching. Cotton remained the dominant crop in the area, but it never returned to pre-Depression levels of profitability. Cattle ranching also made a comeback, with livestock numbers rising through the 1950s. Oil drilling began before 1910 and escalated with drilling in the South Vernon Oil Field in 1923.<sup>67</sup> Petroleum production in Vernon and Wilbarger County peaked in the 1960s but remained an economic driver, even as gas and oil production declined in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>68</sup> In the 1990s, Vernon's economy was still driven primarily by agriculture and oil. at this time, the total population of Wilbarger County was 15,121, and that year the county produced over 1,200,000 barrels of oil.<sup>69</sup> Between 1910 and 1930, Vernon's population grew from 3,195 to 9,137.<sup>70</sup> That trend continued, with than 12,000 people living in Vernon during the 1950s.<sup>71</sup> The city has been remained both the county seat and its population center, with the vast majority of Wilbarger County residents living in Vernon, perhaps because US 70, US 283, US 183, and US 287 all pass through the city.

Sitting prominently in the original Vernon townsite within a Shelbyville-style square, the current county courthouse is the third on this site, following a native pine wood-frame structure built in 1883 and a brick structure constructed in 1890.<sup>72</sup> The 1890 courthouse, designed by architect J. E. Flanders and built by the firm of Strain, Risley, and Swinburn, was demolished in 1928 to make room for the current building.<sup>73</sup> The Neoclassical sandstone courthouse was designed by architects Voelcker & Dixon, a firm from Wichita Falls, and built at a cost of \$375,000. H.C Snodgrass was the firm's local representative during construction.<sup>74</sup> The cornerstone was laid in October 1928, and the building was dedicated on July 4, 1929.<sup>75</sup> In a 45-year retrospective, the *Vernon Daily Record* called the current courthouse a "massive and majestic testimony to the vision that community leaders in the years immediately prior to the Great Depression had for their town."<sup>76</sup> The Plaza Theater faces the eastern façade of the courthouse across Cumberland Street, signifying the importance of the theater to the community.

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<sup>64</sup> "Population of Texas by Counties," *1950 Census of Population: Preliminary Counts*, Series PC-2, No. 43, Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, September 14, 1950.

<sup>65</sup> 1940 U.S. Census, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas.

<sup>66</sup> "Vernon Negro School Opens With Enrollment of 185," *Vernon Daily Record*, August 4, 1942, 3. Adjusting the academic calendar to ensure that Black children could work in the fields was a common practice throughout Texas and much of the U.S.

<sup>67</sup> Ross, *Early-day History of Wilbarger County*, 51.

<sup>68</sup> Leffler, "Wilbarger County."

<sup>69</sup> Leffler, "Wilbarger County."

<sup>70</sup> "Texas Almanac: City Population History from 1850–2000," [texasalmanac.com](http://texasalmanac.com)

<sup>71</sup> Davis, "Vernon, TX."

<sup>72</sup> "Courthouse Built for the Ages," *Vernon Daily Record*, January 1, 1975, 1–2, [newspapers.com](http://newspapers.com).

<sup>73</sup> "Courthouse Cornerstone Laid Here Today," *Vernon Daily Record*, October 10, 1928, 6, [newspapers.com](http://newspapers.com).

<sup>74</sup> "Local Briefs," *Vernon Daily Record*, July 9, 1928, 8, [newspapers.com](http://newspapers.com).

<sup>75</sup> "Wilbarger County Courthouse Being Dedicated Today," *Vernon Daily Record*, July 4, 1929, 2, [newspapers.com](http://newspapers.com).

<sup>76</sup> "Courthouse Built for the Ages," *Vernon Daily Record*, January 1, 1975, 1–2, [newspapers.com](http://newspapers.com).

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### Significance of the Plaza Theater under Criterion A (Entertainment/Recreation)

The Plaza Theater is significant at the local level under Criterion A for Entertainment and Recreation. It represents the end of the golden age of moviegoing in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, at a time when television was causing a massive change in American culture, as well as the demise of the Interstate Theatre Circuit. The Plaza has served the Vernon community since its completion in 1953.

Moving pictures became a feature in vaudeville shows in the late 1890s.<sup>77</sup> At the turn of the century, movies as entertainment in their own right caught on across the country with the explosive growth of the nickelodeon – a small, simple theater that charged five cents for admission. The biggest names in early movie studios got their start in this cheap and profitable format.<sup>78</sup> When theater owners began to invest in more attractive theaters to bring in the growing middle class, nickelodeons disappeared, and movie theaters became show palaces. Movie exhibitors built regional and eventually national chains of movie theaters.<sup>79</sup> The speed with which these entrepreneurs became wildly successful is a testament to how quickly movies became an important part of American entertainment. In the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, enterprising theater owners merged their theater chains with movie studios to ensure that they would always have top films and favored access to new movies.<sup>80</sup> This business model was incredibly profitable and well-known studios such as Paramount, RKO, Warner Brothers and Twentieth Century-Fox all developed out of this early system.<sup>81</sup> The Interstate Amusement Company, which had theaters in the South and Southwest, was a regional chain that became affiliated first with RKO and then with Paramount.

Founded by Karl St. John Hoblitzelle and his brother in 1905, the Interstate Amusement Company came out of vaudeville, adding films to its theaters in 1920. In his time as president of Interstate, Hoblitzelle was a pioneer who was the first theater operator to use air conditioning in Texas theaters, and he was also the first theater empresario in the Southwest to install sound equipment in theaters. Hoblitzelle made Dallas his permanent home and decided to retire in 1929; in 1930 he sold his theater interests to RKO. At this time the entertainment business in Texas was in steep decline due to the Great Depression; Hoblitzelle also believed some business problems were related to competition between RKO and the Paramount-Publix theater chain.<sup>82</sup> RKO and Paramount both went into bankruptcy in early 1933, and Hoblitzelle, wanting to save the business he had built and the jobs of hundreds of people,<sup>83</sup> agreed to take over all RKO business in Texas, creating the Interstate Theatre Circuit. This new circuit was comprised of Interstate Amusement-RKO theaters and theaters of Southern Enterprises, Inc. of Texas, a company previously controlled by Paramount. In 1933 Paramount asked Hoblitzelle to take over another chain of theaters in smaller towns in Texas, the Dent Circuit. These theaters became a separate corporation, Texas Consolidated Theatres. Hoblitzelle was president of both Interstate and Texas Consolidated.<sup>84</sup> Interstate and Texas Consolidated were formed at the beginning of the golden age of movie houses and expanded throughout the early 1940s. By 1946, Hoblitzelle oversaw more than 170 theaters.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 14–15.

<sup>78</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 30–31. Founders of Twentieth-Century Fox, Universal, Warner Brothers, Paramount and MGM all began their careers as nickelodeon owners.

<sup>79</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 29–30.

<sup>80</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 34–36.

<sup>81</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 59–66.

<sup>82</sup> Faust and Beck, *Overview and History, Interstate Theatre Collection*, Dallas Public Library.

<sup>83</sup> Crain, William H. "Hoblitzelle, Karl St. John." *Handbook of Texas Online*, tshaonline.org.

<sup>84</sup> Faust and Beck, *Overview and History, Interstate Theatre Collection*, Dallas Public Library.

<sup>85</sup> Interstate Theatres. *Manual: 40th Interstate Theatres Anniversary*, pamphlet, 1946, 2, Portal to Texas History, texashistory.unt.edu.

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As Interstate continued to grow throughout the 1930s and mid-1940s, it became entangled in a lawsuit against Paramount and other major movie studios which accused the Hollywood giants of creating an unfair situation for independent movie exhibitors due to studios having control over both film licensing and physical movie theaters. An anti-trust lawsuit over this issue was opened by the federal government in 1938. The case stated that because the studios favored their own movie house circuits, they were denying independent theater operators fair positioning for films. The studios litigated the case all the way to the Supreme Court, losing a 1948 decision in what became a landmark anti-trust case.<sup>86</sup> This decision led to major movie studios splitting their film licensing businesses from their movie theater ownership. The model studios had used to exert control over the moviegoing business in the 1930s and 40s was broken; eight major studios were forced to divest from their theater ownership.<sup>87</sup> The process of movie studios giving up their theater chains led to tumultuous changes which were finalized in a Consent Decree of 1949.<sup>88</sup> Interstate became a part of United-Paramount pictures, and while Hoblitzelle maintained control of Interstate's Texas theaters until his death in 1967, the company reported to Paramount in New York City. In 1953, United Paramount Theatres merged with the American Broadcasting Company, forming American Broadcasting-Paramount Theatres. In 1965 this corporation changed its name to the American Broadcasting Companies (ABC). Interstate Theatres was now called ABC-Interstate Theatres, and was part of the largest movie corporation of its type in the country.<sup>89</sup> Interstate had maintained its presence in the Southwest throughout all this turmoil, including in the North Texas town of Vernon.

The Interstate Theatre Circuit had many subsidiaries and experienced multiple organizational changes throughout the golden age of moviegoing. The Dent Theatre Circuit, started by Louis L. Dent, owned theaters in smaller towns in Texas and operated at least three theaters in Vernon during the late 1920s: the Broadway, the Queen, and the Vernon, the last of which Dent remodeled and reopened in 1927. Dent's holdings in Vernon were organized as Vernon Theatres, Inc.<sup>90</sup> Dent Theatres merged with Interstate Theatres after the summer of 1933; in an effort to keep small theaters organized under one masthead and large theaters under another, Interstate formed Texas Consolidated Theatres for its smaller holdings. By 1935, both Interstate and Texas Consolidated were owned by Paramount, and Karl Hoblitzelle, president of both subsidiaries, held controlling management privileges.<sup>91</sup> Texas Consolidated appears on legal paperwork for the Plaza, but as early as 1941 Interstate and Texas Consolidated were advertising as a single entity,<sup>92</sup> and the Plaza was advertised as an Interstate theater. For the purposes of this document, *Interstate Theatres* will be used to represent both Interstate and Texas Consolidated Theatres' business and community dealings in Vernon.

While Interstate initially had a relationship with Paramount for securing films for its theaters, after a 1938 anti-trust case against Paramount and other large studios was settled in 1949, Paramount was forced to split into two entities: Paramount Pictures produced and distributed films, while United Paramount Pictures exhibited films. Shortly before the Plaza opened in 1953, United Paramount merged with the American Broadcasting Company, forming American Broadcasting-Paramount Pictures, and Interstate became a subsidiary of this new corporation. This corporation became the American Broadcasting Companies, Inc. (ABC) in 1965.<sup>93</sup> Business dealings in the 1970s in Vernon refer to Interstate as *ABC-Interstate*, and that is reflected in this document.

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<sup>86</sup> *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc.*, 334 US 131 (1948).

<sup>87</sup> "The Paramount Decrees," United States Department of Justice.

<sup>88</sup> *United States v. Paramount Pictures Inc. et al*, U.S. District Court, S.D. New York. Equity No. 87-273. March 3, 1949.

<sup>89</sup> Faust and Beck, *Overview and History, Interstate Theatre Collection*, Dallas Public Library.

<sup>90</sup> Correspondence, "Dent Theatres regarding Vernon Theatres," October 18, 1927, Interstate Theatre Collection, Dallas Public Library & Dallas History Division.

<sup>91</sup> Katherine Faust and Paul Beck, eds., *Interstate Theatre Collection: Overview and History*, Dallas Public Library & Dallas History Division.

<sup>92</sup> Interstate Advertisement, *Texas Almanac*, 1941-1942, University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, 14, [texashistory.unt.edu](http://texashistory.unt.edu).

<sup>93</sup> Faust and Beck, "Overview and History," *Interstate Theatre Collection*, Dallas Public Library.



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## Movie Theaters in Vernon, Texas

The first movie theater in Vernon opened before the turn of the century, and by the late 1940s, Vernon contained four movie houses and two drive-in theaters. Between the 1920s and the early 1950s, a total of at least six different movie houses and two drive-in theaters operated in Vernon.

### *The Vernon Opera House and More's Theatre*

While local lore holds that the Plaza Theater was “built on the ruins of the old Opera House,” that is not entirely accurate. The Plaza was built on a property that had once been the site of an opera house, as shown on an 1891 Sanborn map, and a local newspaper at that time mentions “the Opera House Block, east side of Square” in an advertisement.<sup>94</sup> This location, on Block 15, would become 1717 Cumberland Street. By 1896, the Opera House was gone, along with all the other adjacent businesses; the opera house was replaced by the New Brick Livery. At last, two other theaters in Vernon were called “Opera House” in later years. A 1907 Sanborn map shows an “Opera House” on Main Street between Pease and Texas Streets; that opera house was destroyed by fire<sup>95</sup> and by 1912, a Sanborn map shows offices at that location.

In 1920, the last opera house in Vernon was located in Block 12, and labeled on a Sanborn Map as a “Cinema.” Called More's Theatre, after owner R. L. More, the venue opened sometime after June 1915.<sup>96</sup> By 1920, it had been renamed the Vernon Opera House.<sup>97,98</sup> Dent Theatres bought the Opera House, and remodeled and reopened it in 1927 as the Vernon Theatre. Interstate took over the Dent circuit as part of Texas Consolidated Theatres in 1933, and the Vernon Theatre became the premiere Interstate theater in Vernon until it burned down in 1952.<sup>99</sup> Interstate replaced the Vernon Theatre with the Plaza, built several blocks away from the Vernon Theatre location. Interstate did not rebuild on the site of the fire, and instead rented out the property, first to a used car dealer<sup>100</sup> and later to the City of Vernon.<sup>101</sup> Today, the property is owned by the city and used as a parking lot.<sup>102</sup> The future Plaza property was a livery through at least 1912 and, in 1920, housed a 50-car garage. In 1953, Interstate built a new state-of-the-art showplace, the Plaza Theater, at 1717 Cumberland Street.

### *The Broadway Theatre*

Not much is known about this Interstate property. Records show the Broadway was open for business in February 1926, and Dent Theatres correspondence shows a new lease agreement was signed for this theater in March 1928.<sup>103</sup> Current research has located advertising for the Broadway Theatre only through early September 1928.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Advertisement, *Vernon Weekly Guard*, August 1, 1890, 1, Portal to Texas History, [texashistory.unt.edu](http://texashistory.unt.edu).

<sup>95</sup> R. H. Nichols, “Home Town Stuff,” *Vernon Daily Record*, September 30, 1953, 1, 3, [newspapers.com](http://newspapers.com). This article discusses a Vernon street scene postcard from 45-50 years prior, depicting the “famed Vernon opera house,” located above a bank and a grocery store, and noting that it was one of several buildings destroyed or badly damaged by fire.

<sup>96</sup> Vernon's New Opera House nearing Completion,” *Wichita Daily Times*, July 9, 1915. Via [newspapers.com](http://newspapers.com).

<sup>97</sup> “The Vernon Opera House, Formerly More's,” Advertisement, *Vernon Record*, February 13, 1920, 2, [newspaperarchive.com](http://newspaperarchive.com).

<sup>98</sup> “Citation by Publication,” *Vernon Record*, August 21, 1921, 7, [newspapers.com](http://newspapers.com). Record of court case against R. L. More for monies due for the heating plant and vapor system at the Vernon Opera House, providing a location matching the Vernon Theatre of 1927.

<sup>99</sup> “Interstate Secures Okay to Construct New Theatre on Properties in Vernon,” *Vernon Daily Record*, November 2, 1952, 1, [newspapers.com](http://newspapers.com).

<sup>100</sup> Interstate Correspondence, Fred Palmer to W. E. Mitchell, April 18, 1956, *Interstate Theatre Collection*, Dallas Public Library.

<sup>101</sup> Interstate Correspondence, Van Alen Hollomon, June 5, 1956, *Interstate Theatre Collection*, Dallas Public Library.

<sup>102</sup> Wilbarger County Appraisal District Map, 2021, [www.wilbargerappraisal.org](http://www.wilbargerappraisal.org).

<sup>103</sup> Correspondence, Dent Theatres to Mr. Robt. Sparks, March 22, 1928, *Interstate Theatre Collection*, Dallas Public Library.

<sup>104</sup> “Broadway,” Advertisement, *Vernon Daily Record*, September 8, 1928, 2, [newspapers.com](http://newspapers.com).

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*The Queen Theatre*

Another Interstate theater, the Queen Theatre appears in advertisements and Interstate correspondence between 1926 and 1934.<sup>105</sup> It was located Lot 14 in Block 2 of the Original Town of Vernon,<sup>106</sup> currently part of the Waggoner National Bank property at 1818 Texas Street. Current research has located newspaper advertisements for the Queen from September 1926 through March 1927. In late March 1927, the Queen and Broadway Theatres sold tickets for the grand reopening of the Vernon Theatre.<sup>107</sup>

*The Pictorium ("Pic") Theatre*

Located at 1726 Pease Street,<sup>108</sup> this Interstate theater was open by early February 1918,<sup>109</sup> and was part of the Dent theater circuit when that business was acquired by Interstate. The Pic was built by contractor W. W. Greever, and the Greever family leased the building to Interstate,<sup>110</sup> an unusual arrangement for Interstate, which typically owned its theaters.<sup>111</sup> The theater seated 500 people<sup>112</sup> and often advertised in tandem with the Vernon Theatre. As the movie industry became supplanted by television, Interstate tried to renegotiate the lease. In April 1956, Interstate told their local manager, Fred Palmer, to request a reduction in rent from the Pic building owners, as it was necessary for the theatre to close.<sup>113</sup> Later, Interstate tried to break the lease, but the landlord would not agree to the company forfeiting its contract. Interstate then tried unsuccessfully to convert the space to a retail store and bring in a subtenant,<sup>114</sup> paying final rent on the property in 1968.<sup>115</sup> The building at 1726 Pease Street is still extant, but it is no longer used as a movie theater.

*The Vernon Theatre*

Located on Main Street in Vernon next to City Hall,<sup>116</sup> the Vernon Theatre held its grand opening on March 24, 1927, under the auspices of Dent Theatres.<sup>117</sup> Twice as large as any other theater in Vernon with 1,000 seats,<sup>118</sup> this was the showplace theater of the city and the focus of Interstate's interaction with the local community. In 1929, Interstate installed the innovative Vitaphone & Movitone systems, which synchronized sound and images, to give theatergoers the most modern moviegoing experience possible.<sup>119</sup> The Vernon also continued running a variety of live shows until at least 1937.<sup>120</sup> Interstate's founder and president Karl Hoblitzelle had always run his company to be civic-minded and insisted

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<sup>105</sup> Correspondence, Dent Theatres and C. F. Swartwood, December 5, 1931, *Interstate Theatre Collection*, Dallas Public Library. This correspondence discusses a lease ending August 9, 1934.

<sup>106</sup> Correspondence, Dent Theatres to Mr. R. D. Adrian, December 17, 1930, *Interstate Theatre Collection*, Dallas Public Library.

<sup>107</sup> "Congratulations-Best Wishes," *Vernon Daily Record*, March 24, 1927, 5, newspapers.com.

<sup>108</sup> "Business Guide, Theatres & Entertainment," *Vernon Daily Record*, July 11, 1954, 5, newspapers.com.

<sup>109</sup> "At the Theatres," *Vernon Daily Record*, February 5, 1918, 2, newspapers.com.

<sup>110</sup> Correspondence, Lease Renewal-Pictorium, April 13, 1948, *Interstate Theatre Collection*, Dallas Public Library.

<sup>111</sup> Ross, *Early-day History of Wilbarger County*, 102. The Greever family was in Vernon by 1884.

<sup>112</sup> "El Rancho Drive-In Open at Vernon, Tex." *Box Office Magazine*, March 12, 1949, 96, yumpu.com.

<sup>113</sup> Correspondence, W. E. Mitchell, April 3, 1956, *Interstate Theatre Collection*, Dallas Public Library.

<sup>114</sup> Correspondence, W. E. Mitchell, October 13, 1962, *Interstate Theatre Collection*, Dallas Public Library.

<sup>115</sup> Correspondence, W. E. Mitchell, March 25, 1968, *Interstate Theatre Collection*, Dallas Public Library.

<sup>116</sup> Agreement between Arthur A. Keys and Vernon Theatres, September 27, 1929, *Interstate Theatre Collection*, Dallas Public Library.

<sup>117</sup> "Congratulations-Best Wishes," *Vernon Daily Record*, March 24, 1927, 5, newspapers.com.

<sup>118</sup> "El Rancho Drive-In Open at Vernon, Tex." *Box Office Magazine*, March 12, 1949, 96, yumpu.com.

<sup>119</sup> "Vitaphone to be offered at Vernon Tuesday," *Vernon Daily Record*, February 18, 1929, 5, newspapers.com.

<sup>120</sup> Advertisement, *Vernon Daily Record*, September 23, 1937, 2, newspapers.com.

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on family-focused entertainment for his theaters; Interstate's motto was "Dedicated to Community Service."<sup>121</sup> The Vernon Theatre held many community-centered events, including broadcasting President Roosevelt's speeches in the 1940s<sup>122</sup>, holding bond rallies in 1942,<sup>123</sup> and sponsoring a Children's Bond Rally in 1945.<sup>124</sup> The theater was also the site of graduations and participated in March of Dimes drives with other Interstate theaters in Texas.<sup>125</sup> On September 7, 1952,<sup>126</sup> the Vernon Theatre burned down, catching fire while a show was in progress. According to Fred Palmer, the fire started in a trash barrel near the rear of the theatre. The building's roof caved in, and other properties on the block were threatened. The Vernon was safely evacuated, but the theater was a total loss.<sup>127</sup> Interstate owned the former Vernon Theatre property into the early 1960s<sup>128</sup> but did not rebuild at this location.

*The Mecca Theatre and The Majestic Theatre, Interstate Competitors*

Open during Vernon's heyday of movie theaters, the Mecca and the Majestic were both owned and operated by Cortez "C. C." Hamm.<sup>129</sup> Mr. Hamm was a Vernon resident who was very active in local business affairs<sup>130</sup> and advertised the Mecca and the Majestic as "home owned" and "home operated."<sup>131</sup> The Mecca, seating 400, in October 1944 was advertised as "Vernon's Newest Theatre."<sup>132</sup> While the location of this theater has not been determined, advertising for the Mecca exists at least through June 1949.<sup>133</sup> The Majestic Theatre, located at 1724 Main Street,<sup>134</sup> was a 350-seat venue<sup>135</sup> advertised in local papers from 1939 through 1954, the same year that Hamm sold the property.<sup>136</sup>

*Drive-In Theaters in Vernon*

Richard Hollingshead, Jr., first patented a drive-in theater design in 1933. Hollingshead had a passion for invention and saw moviegoing as a profitable business, something that people would not give up even during times of economic distress. After much experimentation, Hollingshead devised a system of terraced rows and raised ramps that provided all cars with an unobstructed view. On June 6, 1933, the drive-in was born.<sup>137</sup> Drive-ins were not common until after the Second World War, but by the 1950s, these outdoor movie theaters accounted for almost a quarter of box-office grosses.<sup>138</sup> At one point, Texas contained more drive-ins than any other state.<sup>139</sup> Adding to its four 1940s movie houses, Vernon opened two drive-ins before 1950.

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<sup>121</sup> "Interstate Theaters Celebrates Anniversary," *Wichita Daily Times*, July 28, 1946, 30, newspaperarchive.com.

<sup>122</sup> "The President's Speech," *Vernon Daily Record*, February 23, 1942, 4, newspapers.com.

<sup>123</sup> Advertisement, *Vernon Daily Record*, August 29, 1942, 6, newspapers.com.

<sup>124</sup> "Children's Bond Show," *Vernon Daily Record*, June 11, 1945, 8, newspapers.com.

<sup>125</sup> "March of Dimes Drive Successful," *Vernon Daily Record*, March 2, 1945, 3, newspapers.com.

<sup>126</sup> "Interstate Secures Okay to Construct New Theatre on Properties in Vernon," *Vernon Daily Record*, November 2, 1952, 1, newspapers.com.

<sup>127</sup> "Vernon theater fire loss is estimated at \$200,000," *Wichita Daily Times*, September 8, 1952, 1, newspaperarchive.com.

<sup>128</sup> Correspondence, W. E. Mitchell, April 1, 1960, *Interstate Theatre Collection*, Dallas Public Library.

<sup>129</sup> "Grand Opening of Cactus Theatre is Held Friday Night," *Vernon Daily Record*, April 24, 1949, 19, newspapers.com.

<sup>130</sup> "C.C. Hamm is New Jaycee President," *Vernon Daily Record*, December 16, 1942, 1, newspapers.com.

<sup>131</sup> "Optimist C. C. Hamm," *Vernon Daily Record*, October 10, 1945, 9, newspapers.com.

<sup>132</sup> "Vernon's Newest Theatre," Advertisement, *Vernon Daily Record*, October 5, 1944, 7, newspapers.com.

<sup>133</sup> Advertisement, *Vernon Daily Record*, June 30, 1949, 6, newspapers.com.

<sup>134</sup> "Vernon Business and Buyers' Guide, Theatres & Entertainment," *Vernon Daily Record*, July 11, 1954, 5, newspapers.com.

<sup>135</sup> "El Rancho Drive-In Open at Vernon, Tex." *Box Office Magazine*, March 12, 1949, 96, yumpu.com.

<sup>136</sup> R.H. Nichols, "Home Town Stuff," *Vernon Daily Record*, July 1, 1954, 1, newspapers.com. This article states that the Majestic will continue to operate until Jan 1, 1955.

<sup>137</sup> Kerry Segrave, *Drive-in Theaters: A History from Their Inception in 1933*. (North Carolina, McFarland & Co., 1992), 2-4.

<sup>138</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 91.

<sup>139</sup> "Texas Drive-Ins Film Trail," Texas Film Commission, gov.texas.gov/film/trail/texas-drive-ins-film-trail.

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*The El Rancho*

The El Rancho Drive-In was owned by J. L. “Lew” Groves and opened on March 12, 1949, on Crowell Highway, which is now 5215 College Road, just off US 70. Although *Box Office Magazine* stated that Groves had “operated shows in several places over the Southwest,” at the time of the El Rancho’s opening,<sup>140</sup> no current records for other Groves-owned theaters have been located. In mid-May 1949, a tornado damaged the El Rancho. While a local paper reported that the drive-in was demolished,<sup>141</sup> the theater was advertising again two weeks later and stayed open for years to come. Groves sold the El Rancho drive-in in 1956, relocating to New Mexico to become a program director at a television station.<sup>142</sup> Although no new owner was listed for the 1956 sale in located records, C.C. Hamm was managing the El Rancho in 1959.<sup>143</sup> Records for the El Rancho have been located up to at least 1974, when the theater was again damaged by high winds.<sup>144</sup>

*The Cactus*

Owned by C.C. Hamm, the Cactus Drive-In opened on April 23, 1949, on a six-acre plot that could hold 420 cars. Located on Hill Crest Drive, just five minutes from downtown Vernon, the Cactus featured the latest drive-in technology and a 33-by-42-foot outdoor screen, the largest in Northwest Texas, which projected outward at the top to provide better picture focus and viewing. A neon cactus sign lit the way for moviegoers headed to the drive-in for the night.<sup>145</sup> Hamm welcomed more than 1,000 people on the Cactus Drive-In’s opening night, and invited “all Wilbarger County and Vernon citizens and those of the surrounding area” to visit his new theater.<sup>146</sup> By 1953, Hamm had turned the Cactus into a twin drive-in.<sup>147</sup> It had closed by June 1960, when *Vernon Daily Record* reported that Hamm was considering creating a go-cart track at the drive-in’s former location.<sup>148</sup>

**The Plaza Theater**

Shortly after a fire destroyed the Vernon Theater, Interstate secured funding and announced a location for a new movie theater; Interstate’s Fred Palmer stated in November 1952 that construction on the new movie theater would begin within 45 days. The Vernon Chamber of Commerce expressed their delight and support for a new theater, and Interstate committed to using local labor to construct the new building.<sup>149</sup> By the middle of 1953, opening night had arrived.

“The Charge at Feather River,” a 3-D Western, held its world premiere on June 30, 1953, at the Plaza Theater; the movie opened nationwide July 11, 1953, a Warner Brothers-First National Picture.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> “El Rancho Drive-In Open at Vernon, Tex.” *Box Office Magazine*, March 12, 1949, 96, yumpu.com.

<sup>141</sup> “Drive-In Theater is Wrecked by Twister,” *Vernon Daily Record*, May 19, 1949, 1, newspapers.com.

<sup>142</sup> “Drivin’ Round the Drive-Ins,” *Billboard*, February 11, 1956, 62, books.google.com.

<sup>143</sup> Jan Boyd and Karen Crawford, “Teen Talk,” *Vernon Daily Record*, May 31st, 1959, 17, newspapers.com. Both the Plaza and the El Rancho gave movie passes to graduating seniors.

<sup>144</sup> “Drive-In Damaged,” *Vernon Daily Record*, May 26, 1974, 2, newspapers.com.

<sup>145</sup> “New Drive-In Theatre is Scheduled to Open Here Friday Night,” *Vernon Daily Record*, April 23, 1949, 4, newspapers.com.

<sup>146</sup> “Grand Opening of Cactus Theater is Held Friday Night,” *Vernon Daily Record*, April 24, 1949, 19, newspapers.com.

<sup>147</sup> Advertisement, *Vernon Daily Record*, September 1, 1953, 3, newspapers.com.

<sup>148</sup> “Off the Record,” *Vernon Daily Record*, June 9, 1960, 10, newspapers.com.

<sup>149</sup> “Interstate Secures Okay to Construct New Theatre on Properties in Vernon,” *Vernon Daily Record*, November 2, 1952, 1, newspapers.com.

<sup>150</sup> Alan Gevison, American Film Institute staff. *Within Our Gates: Ethnicity in American Feature Films, 1911–1960*. United Kingdom: University of California Press, 1997. 178. In the American Film Institute Catalog.

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Designed by Dallas movie theater architect Jack Corgan, the Plaza was built specifically for 3-D movies and was equipped with a modern stereophonic sound system. The Plaza contained 1,212 seats, including a 12-seat cry room—a specially designed sound-proofed area where mothers could comfort their children and still see and hear the movie that was showing. The screen was designed to be able to show both 3-D and Cinemascope films, with a larger overall viewing area than older style screens. On opening night, the Plaza's interior was described as "walls of harmonized greens, maroon and gold carpeting, rose screen curtain[s] with ivory figuration and comfortable push-back seats;" the entire building was air-conditioned. Cast members from the opening night film were in attendance: Vera Miles, Guy Madison, Helen Westcott, and others made the trip to Vernon.<sup>151</sup>

As the largest movie house in Vernon, the Plaza continued Interstate's community focus. It held book drives,<sup>152</sup> co-sponsored back-to-school-parties,<sup>153</sup> and offered free children's shows<sup>154</sup> and free Easter shows.<sup>155</sup> The Plaza also participated in Interstate-wide good works, such as a benefit show for the victims of Hurricane Carla in 1961.<sup>156</sup>

Like other theaters of its day, the Plaza held a variety of contests and promotions designed to bring people into the theater, such as dads' contests,<sup>157</sup> onion-peeling contests,<sup>158</sup> watermelon seed spitting contests,<sup>159</sup> a free preview for secretaries,<sup>160</sup> and other special events. Interstate also held chain-wide contests, including a yearly Academy Awards contest; in 1961, an Oklaunion (Wilbarger County) man won a weekly dinner for two at the local Canton Café for the rest of the year, while other prizes included monthly passes to the Plaza for 15 winners.<sup>161</sup>

The Plaza also hosted a special world premiere for the Vernon community when *Copters and Cows* premiered at the theater on March 3, 1956, narrated by Hollywood actor Marvin Miller. The documentary short made use of helicopters while filming and depicted cattle ranching in Vernon.<sup>162</sup> The Plaza also served Vernon's Spanish-speaking moviegoers; Fred Palmer and Interstate executives discussed efforts to keep Spanish-speaking audiences coming to the Plaza.<sup>163</sup>

The Plaza is a relatively late standalone movie theater, constructed during the decline of moviegoing in the early 1950s. Cultural tastes were changing, and American's continuing migration to the suburbs,<sup>164</sup> combined with inflation and the growing popularity of television, contributed to a downturn in attendance even before the Plaza had opened.<sup>165</sup> Speaking in Wichita Falls in 1952, Interstate executive William E. Mitchell described the challenges television created for movie theater owners, and stated that the movie industry had to be prepared to fight to survive.<sup>166</sup> Vernon felt the effects of this

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<sup>151</sup> "Modern Theatre to Open in Vernon," *Wichita Daily Times*, June 28, 1953, 6, newspaperarchive.com.

<sup>152</sup> "Book Matinee Deserves Support," *Vernon Daily Record*, November 12, 1953, 10, newspapers.com

<sup>153</sup> "Sponsoring Merchants Listed for Back-to-School Party," Advertisement, *Vernon Daily Record*, August 15, 1954, 4, newspapers.com.

<sup>154</sup> "Hey Kids" Advertisement, *Vernon Daily Record*, June 24, 1960, 3, newspapers.com.

<sup>155</sup> "Giant Easter Fun Show," Advertisement, *Vernon Daily Record*, March 29, 1972, 6, newspapers.com.

<sup>156</sup> "Plaza to Aid Carla Victims," *Vernon Daily Record*, September 17, 1961, 10, newspapers.com.

<sup>157</sup> "Something 'Special' for Dad," Advertisement, *Vernon Daily Record*, June 14, 1959, 9, newspapers.com.

<sup>158</sup> "Onion Peeling Contest Set..." *Vernon Daily Record*, October 17, 1958, 2, newspapers.com.

<sup>159</sup> Orlin Brewer, "Town Crier," *Vernon Daily Record*, August 5, 1971, 1, newspapers.com.

<sup>160</sup> "Attention, Secretaries and Stenos," Advertisement, *Vernon Daily Record*, September 16, 1959, 3, newspapers.com.

<sup>161</sup> "Three Former Winners Have 'Best Actor' Bids," *Vernon Daily Record*, April 4, 1961, 2; "Jess Hancock is First in Awards Contest Here," *Vernon Daily Record*, April 21, 1961, 1, newspapers.com.

<sup>162</sup> IMDB for year and movie description, world premiere info.

<sup>163</sup> Correspondence, Fred Palmer, July 22, 1961, *Interstate Theatre Collection*, Dallas Public Library.

<sup>164</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 85–86.

<sup>165</sup> Jack Gould, "TV Transforming U.S. Social Scene; Challenges Films," *The New York Times*, June 24, 1951, 1 & 36, New York Times archive at nytimes.com.

<sup>166</sup> "Rotarians Hear Theatre Official," *Wichita Daily Times*, March 27, 1952, 9, newspaperarchive.com.

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decline; by 1956, the Pic had closed. The only Interstate property left was the Plaza, and while the theater kept a full schedule, business was not going well. W. E. Mitchell discussed the Plaza's plight in 1962, stating that "there was a time in Vernon when there were three downtown theaters profitably operating; today there isn't one."<sup>167</sup> Interstate became part of the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) by 1967.<sup>168</sup> ABC-Interstate sold the Plaza in 1977 to Lubbock businessman James G. Barton, a seasoned theater manager who moved with his family to Vernon to take over the movie house.<sup>169</sup>

Barton split the Plaza into a twin cinema shortly after its purchase and transferred ownership of the theater to his son, J. Steve Barton, in 1993.<sup>170</sup> The Plaza closed for some time after that, and in 2002, local artist Steve Taylor bought the theater<sup>171</sup> and began restoring the interior. In 2006, the Plaza was purchased by Steve Ray, a Vernon native, and his business partner, Mark Farr-Nash,<sup>172</sup> who has been running the Plaza as a working twin-cinema theater since 2007.<sup>173</sup>

### Significance under Criterion C (Architecture)

The Plaza Theater is an example of a movie theater built in the Postwar Moderne style. Designed by Texas architect Jack M. Corgan, a pioneer of movie theater design, and constructed in 1953 by the regional theater circuit Interstate Theatres, the Plaza represents the evolution of the movie palace during an era of practical restraint. While the design of the Plaza is decidedly modest compared to theaters of earlier eras, it featured innovative technology for its time, bringing its audience the latest in picture and sound innovations. The theater also employed a Corgan-designed fire-safety system for the projection booth.<sup>174</sup> The building also represents a departure from the previous Art Deco style that Corgan employed in the 1940s. The marquee, highlighted with lights and neon; the terrazzo-floored entrance with its eye-catching tile façade; the outside box office; and the ornamental tower combine to announce the Plaza's presence in the middle of downtown Vernon. With its bold gray, orange, and black pattern, the terrazzo lobby floor leads theater patrons to the Plaza concession stand and auditoriums as it has since 1953. The building retains an excellent degree of integrity.

#### *Jack M. Corgan, Theater Architect of the Southwest*

Born in Hugo, Oklahoma in 1911, Jack M. Corgan grew up in Shawnee, Oklahoma working in construction as an apprentice carpenter from the time he was a teenager.<sup>175</sup> Corgan attended to Oklahoma A&M College, later Oklahoma State University, graduating with a B.A. in architecture in 1935.<sup>176</sup> He worked for his father, Gates Corgan, who was the main contractor and builder for the Griffith Brothers theater circuit in Oklahoma.<sup>177</sup> Jack Corgan both created original designs and remodeled theaters for the Griffiths in Oklahoma, eventually moving to Texas when R.E. Griffith let him know about a work opportunity in Dallas.<sup>178</sup> Corgan took the first architect's licensing test in Texas in 1937 and was one of the first 10 architects licensed to work in the state. Among this early group of draftsmen was W.J. "Bill" Moore, who

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<sup>167</sup> Correspondence, W. E. Mitchell, Interstate Theatres, August 9, 1962, *Interstate Theatre Collection*, Dallas Public Library.

<sup>168</sup> Faust and Beck, *Overview and History*, *Interstate Theatre Collection*, Dallas Public Library.

<sup>169</sup> "Plaza Sold; Twin Show Due," *Vernon Daily Record*, February 17, 1977, 1, newspapers.com.

<sup>170</sup> Wilbarger County deed records, Vol. 00441, 591–593.

<sup>171</sup> Wilbarger County deed records, Vol. 00531, 369–371.

<sup>172</sup> Wilbarger County deed records, Vol. 00585, 311–313.

<sup>173</sup> Oral interview with Mark Farr-Nash and Stephen Ray, August 11, 2021.

<sup>174</sup> "AIA Fellow Nomination: Architectural Practice," nomination application, 1985, Corgan Dallas archives. Research trying to locate patent records for this system has been unsuccessful. See photo log for remnants of the system still at the Plaza.

<sup>175</sup> "How Corgan Began," Jack M. Corgan oral history transcript, Corgan Dallas archive, Corgan Dallas.

<sup>176</sup> Jim Parsons and David Bush, *DFW Deco: Modernistic Architecture of North Texas* (Fort Worth: TCU Press, 2017), 276.

<sup>177</sup> Deborah A. Carmichael, "Griffith Brothers Circuits of Oklahoma: Film Exhibition Success Outside the Studio System" (PhD diss., Ann Arbor, UMI, 2007), 34, 113.

<sup>178</sup> "How Corgan Began," Corgan Dallas archive.

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was also from Oklahoma. Moore and Corgan opened the short-lived (1938–1940) Corgan & Moore Architects in the Dallas Gas Building. The firm specialized in movie theaters; the partners teamed up again in 1942 to design the Last Frontier Hotel, the second hotel-casino to open on the Las Vegas Strip.<sup>179</sup>

Although someone attempted to introduce a drive-in theater concept in Galveston in 1934, this was a temporary theater that ran only short-form movies and closed in less than a month.<sup>180</sup> Jack Corgan is credited with introducing the drive-in movie theater in Texas and Oklahoma as a successful enterprise, sometimes taking on the construction of these outdoor theaters himself. Corgan pioneered using the slip-form concrete method (normally seen in building grain elevators) as a way of building the towers needed for drive-in screens.<sup>181</sup> Corgan is also credited with designing a fire safety system for projection booths, called a “three-point latch and self-closing device,” a crucial safety feature given the danger of early film stock, which was highly flammable.<sup>182</sup> One of the last movie theaters Corgan designed, the Plaza was constructed with this fire safety system, and remnants of the system are visible today.

Corgan temporarily closed his firm’s offices during World War II, reopening Corgan Dallas in 1948. However, he continued to design Texas theaters during the 1940s, including the Rita Theater in Del Rio,<sup>183</sup> and the Teatro Mexico, a Spanish-language theater in Brownsville, which opened in 1945.<sup>184</sup> Both of these projects were renovations of older theaters — not surprising during wartime, when materials were limited and restrictions were in effect.<sup>185</sup> During the war, Corgan served in the Army Air Corps, which led to a passion for flying and his firm’s later work in aviation.<sup>186</sup> This included Dallas’ Love Field in 1958, and work on a Braniff Airlines terminal expansion, called the “Terminal of the Future,” at Love Field in 1968.<sup>187</sup>

Jack Corgan created plans to remodel at least 15 theaters between 1939 and 1950.<sup>188</sup> The changes to these theaters anticipate the design of the Plaza in 1953. For example, the 1939 remodel of the Campus Theater in Stillwater, Oklahoma<sup>189</sup> exemplifies a smaller theater’s transition from Art Deco to Streamline Moderne, with geometric patterns, curves, blocked glass, and signature Streamline portholes, as well as a fanciful tower design, spelling out “Campus,” and asymmetrical façade. The last Corgan theater confirmed before the building of the Plaza—the Cavern Theater in Carlsbad, New Mexico—opened in 1951.<sup>190</sup> Here, the Postwar design is more elaborate than that of the Plaza, with a neon tower that is impressive even when not illuminated. The asymmetrical placement of the tower, tiling of the entrance, and vertical brick patterns on the front façade of the Cavern Theater were echoed in the Plaza’s more modest design, two years later.

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<sup>179</sup> Parsons and Bush, *DFW Deco*, 276.

<sup>180</sup> Segrave, *Drive-in Theaters*, 17–18.

<sup>181</sup> “Drive-In Theater Design Strategy,” *Blog/Process*, Corgan Dallas, Corgan.com

<sup>182</sup> “AIA Fellow Nomination: Architectural Practice,” Corgan Dallas archives, 1985.

<sup>183</sup> “Architect,” *Del Rio News Herald*, September 29, 1943, 11. This article has a photo of Corgan in uniform and mentions that he is serving with the armed forces at this time.

<sup>184</sup> Teatro Mexico Formally Opens Tuesday Night, *Brownsville Herald*, April 23, 1945, 19, newspaperarchive.com. This is another

<sup>185</sup> Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk*, 144–145.

<sup>186</sup> “Jack M. Corgan History,” Corgan Dallas Archives.

<sup>187</sup> David Preziosi, “Braniff Airways Took Dallas to New Heights,” *Legacies: A History Journal for Dallas and North Central Texas* 29, no. 1(Spring 2018): 42–51. In 1958, Corgan & Associates worked on Love Field along with the firm of Broad & Nelson. In 1968, the Braniff Airlines terminal was designed solely by Corgan & Associates.

<sup>188</sup> Some of the remodeling of theaters can be attributed to changing tastes, and fires, rather than wartime shortages and rules. Corgan was prolific during this period, designing 17 drive-ins and over 20 original theaters confirmed in current research.

<sup>189</sup> Jennifer Palmer, “Hideaway Celebrates 50 Years,” *The Oklahoman*, April 1, 2009, www.oklahoman.com. The theater was demolished in 2000 to make way for the expansion of a restaurant next door.

<sup>190</sup> “Cavern Theater Performing Arts Centre,” cityofcarlsbadnm.com. The City of Carlsbad now owns the Cavern, and since 2015 has been renovating the theater with the goal of turning it into a performing arts center.

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Corgan was reportedly the architect of record for more than 375 movie theaters.<sup>191</sup> Of the 87 theaters confirmed by current research, 35 of those buildings are extant today, and four still operate as movie theaters; an additional nine venues feature live events. Of the 41 Corgan theaters located in Texas, 15 buildings are extant and four are still movie theaters.<sup>192</sup> The Plaza Theater was one of the last movie theaters Corgan designed; of the Corgan movie theaters located, only two were built after the Plaza, and neither is operating as a movie theater anymore. The Westwood,<sup>193</sup> later called the Promenade,<sup>194</sup> in Richardson, has been demolished,<sup>195</sup> and the Park Forest Theatre,<sup>196</sup> in Dallas, is now an antique mall, with movie poster boxes and its marquee still visible. Both of these theaters, each named after the shopping mall of its suburban location, opened in 1965. In contrast to the Plaza, the marquees for these theaters are more modest. While the Plaza marquee occupies the center of the front façade and the name of the theater is displayed prominently in neon, both the Westwood and the Park Forest designs have marquees built in a more modern and subdued style, moving toward the future when traditional eye-catching neon marquees are a thing of the past, and shopping center theaters may be built with no marquees at all.<sup>197</sup>

## Conclusion

The Plaza Theater opened when the golden age of the movie theaters was ending. The last theater to be built in Vernon, a city that at one time had numerous theaters and drive-ins operating concurrently, the Plaza is a lasting place of entertainment that has retained its structural integrity. Designed by prolific architect Jack Corgan, an innovator of movie theater design who was based in Dallas, the Plaza was built to provide its patrons with the very best and most modern movie experience available. When it was owned by Interstate Theatres, the theater engaged the Vernon community in ways that lived up to the company ideal of wholesome family entertainment and civic participation. This movie theater continues to entertain its community today while maintaining its 1953 appearance.

The Plaza, with its large traditional marquee and asymmetrical modern façade calling to the future, can be seen as something of a bridge between the golden era of movie theaters and the age of multiplexes to come, a true symbol of moviegoing in the Postwar era. It is nominated to the National Register of Historic Places at the local level of significance under Criterion A in the area of Entertainment/Recreation and under Criterion C in the area of Architecture. The period of significance begins in 1953 when the building was completed and extends to 1973, the current 50-year date for eligibility.

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<sup>191</sup> "11 Texans named AIA Fellows," *Texas Architect*, Vol 35, No. 3, May/June 1985, 73, [usmodernist.org](http://usmodernist.org).

<sup>192</sup> An additional three theaters now specialize in live performances and do not currently show films, and some closed theaters have the potential to reopen as movie theaters; these figures reflect theaters operating in 2021.

<sup>193</sup> "Westwood Embraces All Modern Theater Construction Ideals, Film Techniques," *Richardson Daily News*, June 17, 1965, 20, [newspaperarchive.com](http://newspaperarchive.com). An ABC-Interstate theater.

<sup>194</sup> "Westwood Promenade Theatre," *Richardson Daily News*, May 10, 1970, a special section, 1–7, [newspaperarchive.com](http://newspaperarchive.com). Interstate records indicate that by 1973, the company was calling the cinemas the Promenade I and Promenade II; the theater was part of the Promenade Shopping Center.

<sup>195</sup> "Promenade 6," [cinematreaasures.org](http://cinematreaasures.org). In 1984, the Promenade auditoriums were divided, creating 6 screens. In 1994, the theater was demolished to make room for a grocery store.

<sup>196</sup> "Swank Film Farce for New Suburban," and "Grand Opening" *Dallas Morning News*, July 22, 1965, 39. The Park Forest seated 650, and featured "deep, foamy "airliner lounge" seating." The front façade is still visible; North Dallas Antique Mall, 11722 Marsh Ln., Suite 353, Dallas.

<sup>197</sup> "Marqueeless, 999-Seat Theater Open in Cleveland's Severance Center," *Box Office Magazine*, July 12, 1965, ME-1, [yumpu.com](http://yumpu.com).



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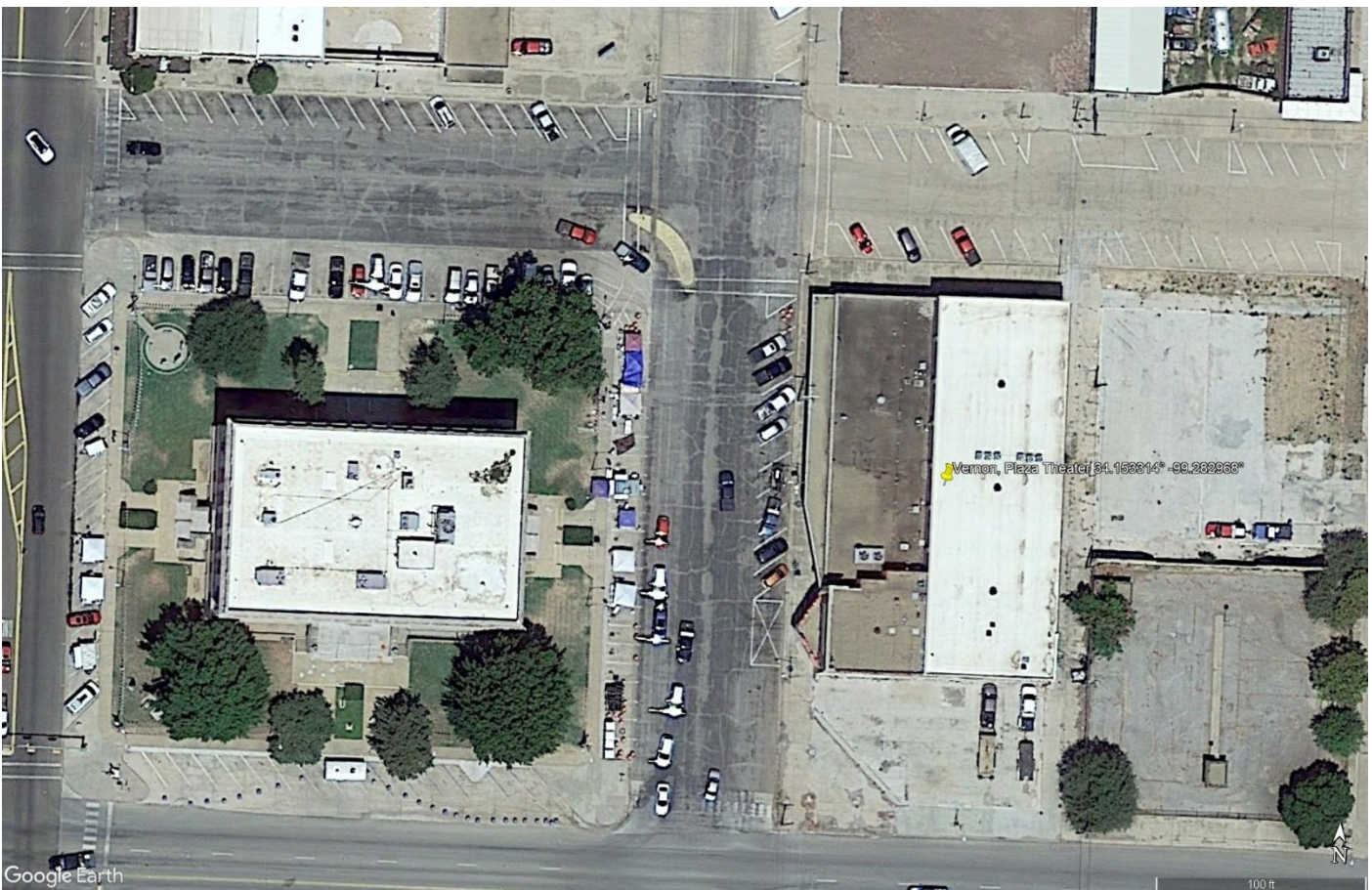
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Map 1. Location of Wilbarger County within the State of Texas (MapSof.net)



Map 2. Location of the Plaza Theater (Google Earth, February 2022)



832

PEASE STREET (100' wide)

CUMBERLAND STREET (100' wide)

Concrete Sidewalk

62.15'

Denotes a Survey Nail set.

47.85'

LOT LINE

131.20'

J. Steve Barton, et ux  
K. 441, P. 351

124.2'

7.85'

40.0'

48.8'

Plaza Theatre Building Tract  
13,577. Sq. Ft.  
2-story Masonry Construction

LOT 8 30'

LOT 7 30'

LOT 6 30'

LOT 5 30'

LOT 4 30'

LOT 3 30'

LOT 2 30'

LOT 1 30'

Common Masonry Party Wall

110.00'

Paul W. Scott and  
Arlene Scott  
Lots 1 and 2  
K. 307, P. 367

20' ALLEY

BLOCK 15

LOT 9 30'

LOT 10 30'

LOT 11 30'

LOT 12 30'

LOT 13 30'

LOT 14 30'

LOT 15 30'

LOT 16 30'

Concrete Fence

180.00'

SURVEY OF A TRACT OF LAND KNOWN AS THE PLAZA THEATRE BUILDING TRACT, CONTAINING 13,577. SQUARE FEET OF LAND OUT OF AND A PART OF LOT 3, LOT 4, LOT 5, LOT 6, LOT 7, AND LOT 8, ALL IN BLOCK 15 OF THE ORIGINAL TOWN OF VERNON, WILBARGER COUNTY, TEXAS.

I, GARY S. NAYLOR, REGISTERED PROFESSIONAL SURVEYOR NO. 2431 IN THE STATE OF TEXAS, HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THE FOREGOING PLAT IS TRUE AND CORRECT ACCORDING TO THE MAP OF RECORD AND A SURVEY MADE BY ME ON THE GROUND FEBRUARY 26-27, 2002.

REF:  
Buyer: Stephen Taylor, et ux  
Seller: Steve J. Barton, et ux

SCALE:  
1 inch = 30 feet

ENGINEERING SURVEYS  
Box 426, Quanah, Texas 79252  
940-663-5454

STATE OF TEXAS COUNTY OF WILBARGER  
I hereby certify that this instrument was filed and time stamped hereon by me and was duly recorded in the Official Public Records of Wilbarger County, Texas.

VOL. 531 PAGE 828  
Frances M. DeCade  
Wilbarger County Clerk  
Deputy

Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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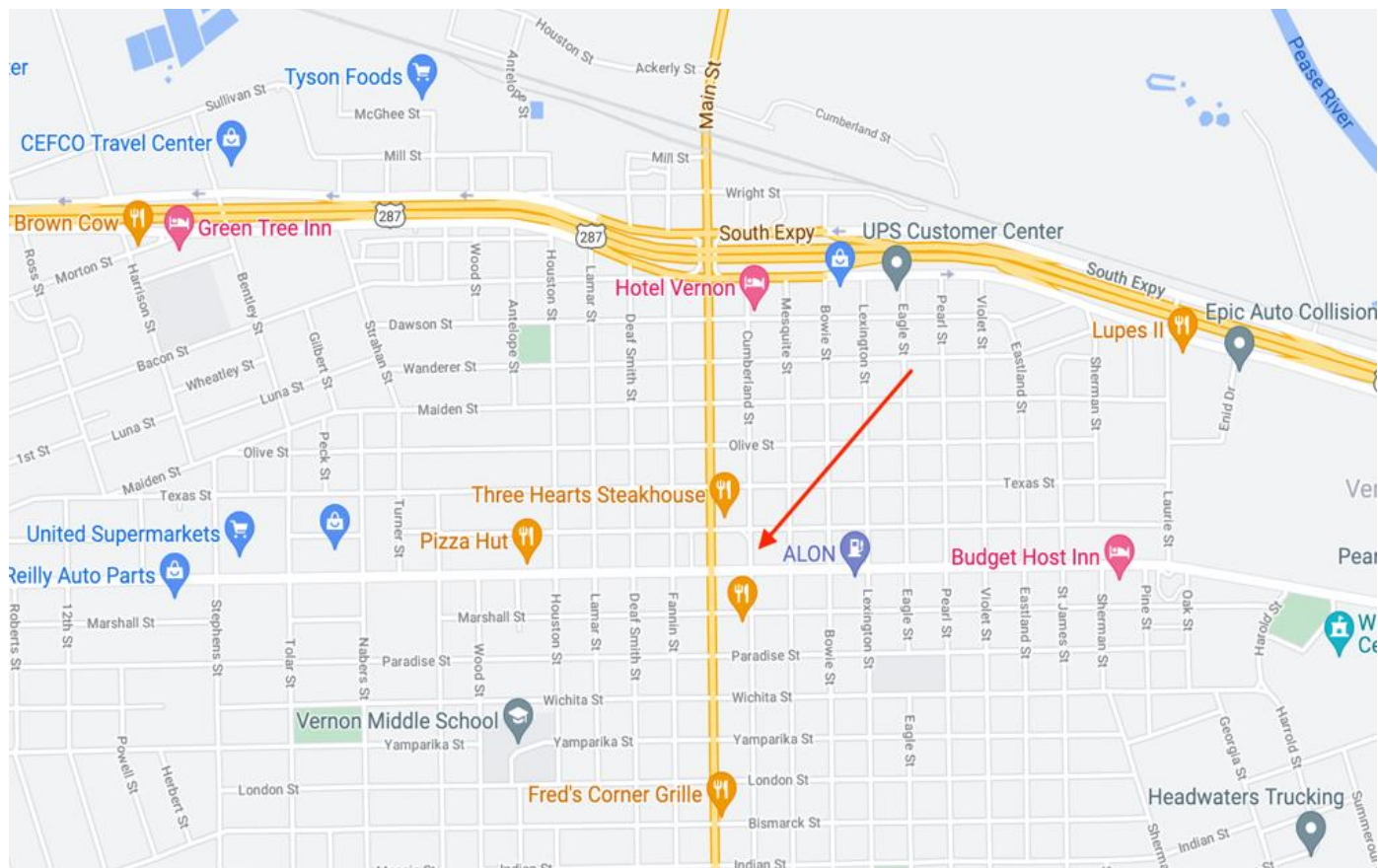
Map 4. Vernon, Wichita Falls, and the Dallas-Fort Worth area (Google Maps, November 2021, annotated by the authors)





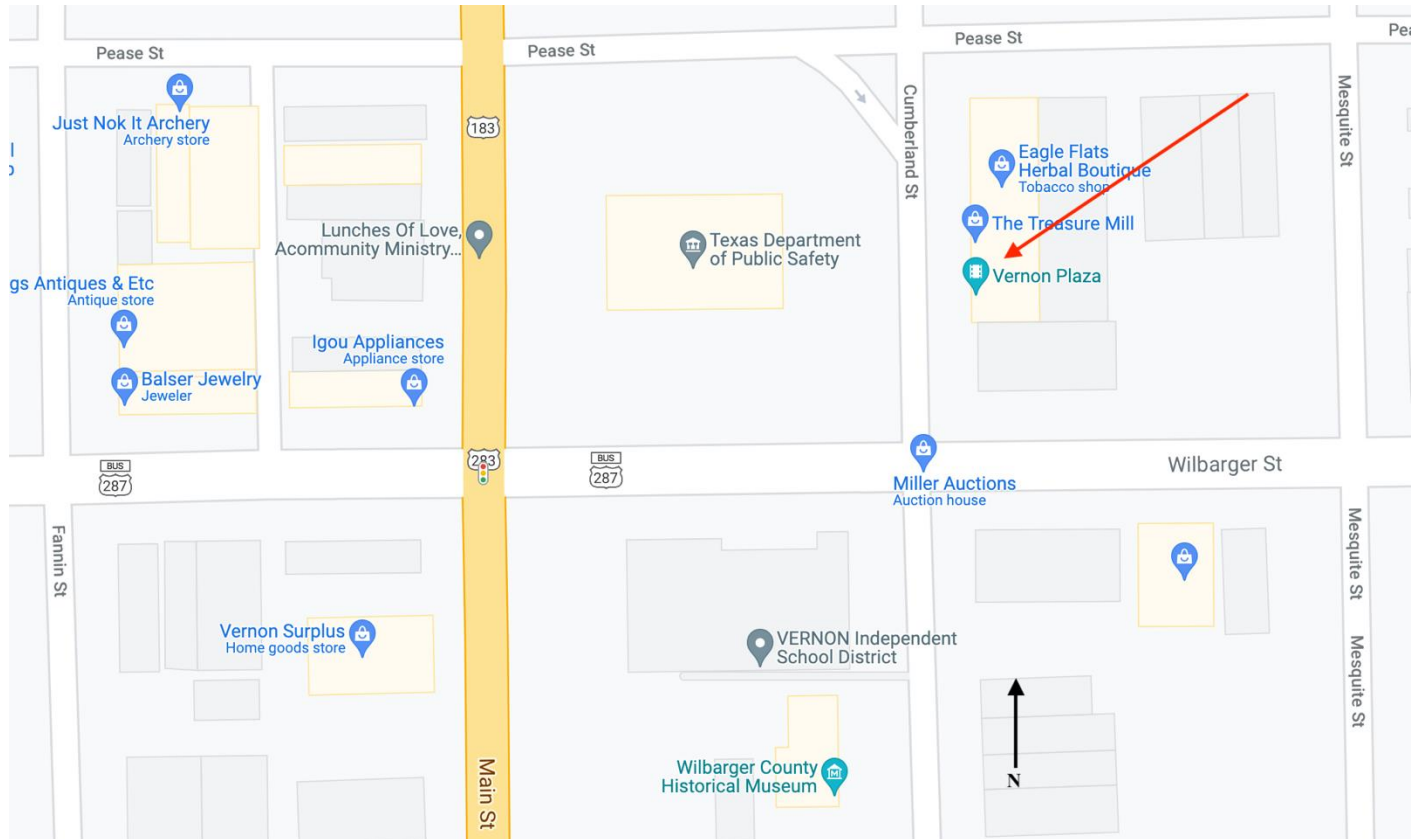
Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

Map 5. Location of the Plaza Theater within the City of Vernon, as indicated by a red arrow (Google Maps, November 2021, annotated by the authors)



Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

Map 6. Location of the Plaza Theater , across from the Wilbarger County Courthouse, as indicated by a red arrow (Google Maps, Nov. 2021, annotated by the authors)



Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

Map 7. The nominated boundary of the Plaza Theater and attached commercial block containing four legal parcels, outlined in red below (Wilbarger County CAD, November 2021, annotated by the authors).

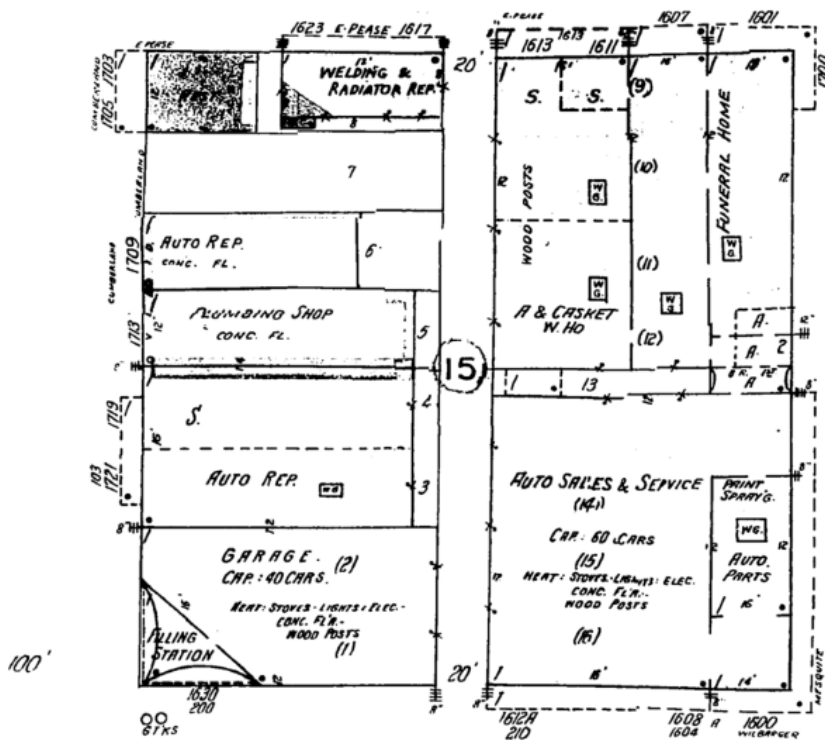
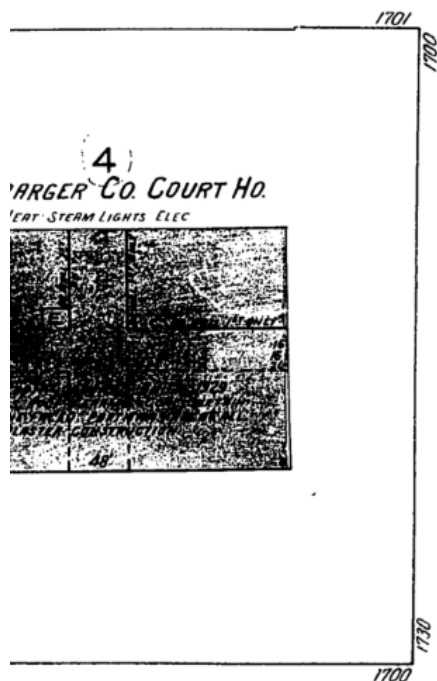


**Map Details:**

- Boundaries:** N. Main, N. Cumberland, E. Pease, E. Wilbarger.
- Buildings and Features:**
  - Drug Store (D.G.)
  - Barber
  - Bank
  - U.S. Post Office
  - Office
  - Cinema
  - Variety S
  - D.G.
  - Kitchen
  - Restri
  - Hotel Office
  - Public Library
  - Concrete Fls. Implements
  - Garage (Capacity 60 Cars, No Heat, Lights Electric, Wood Posts, Concrete Floor)
  - Auto Repair
  - Plumber
  - Restri
  - Office
  - Auto Accessory Concrete Floor
  - Mattress Factory
- Dimensions:** Various dimensions are provided for buildings and lots, ranging from 10' to 20'.
- Scale:** Scale of Feet (0 to 150).
- Copyright:** Copyright 1920 by the Sanborn Map Co.

Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

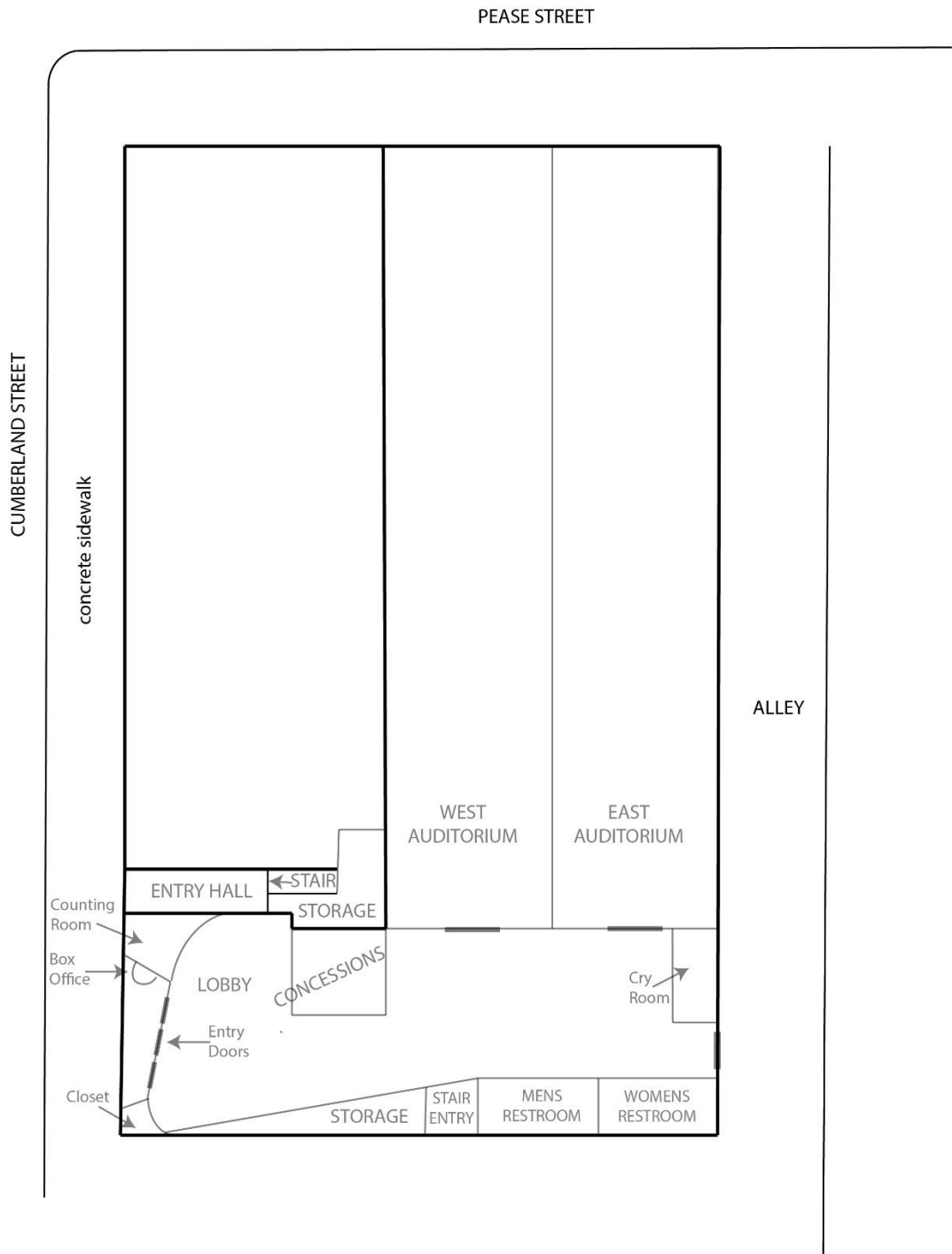
Map 9. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Vernon. Sept. 1927-Feb. 1948, Sheet 2 detail). No Sanborn maps show the footprint of the nominated building. (Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Library of Congress, www.loc.gov, excerpted by the authors)





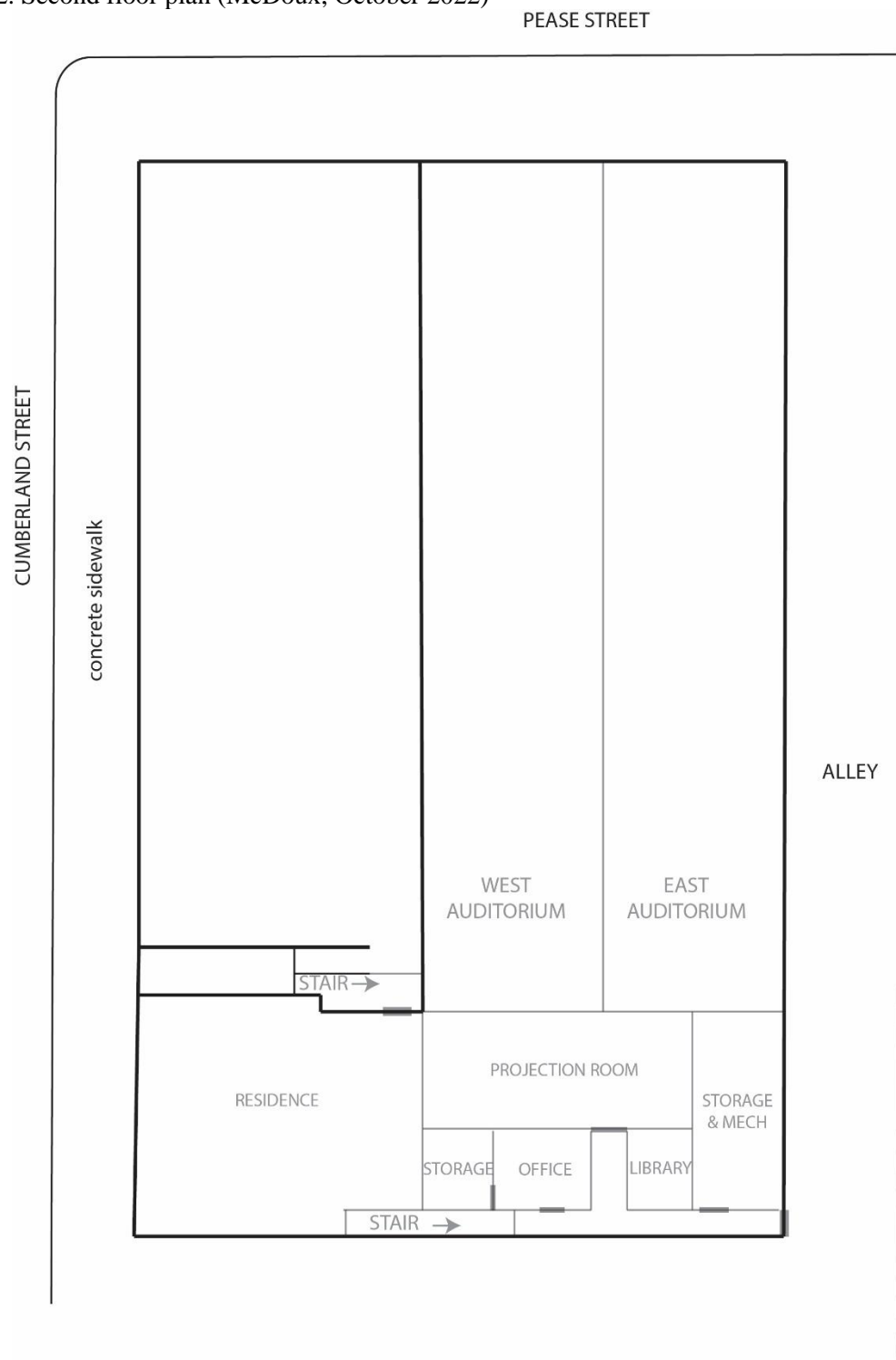
Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

Figures Figure 1. Ground floor plan (McDoux, October 2022)



Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

Figure 2. Second floor plan (McDoux, October 2022)



Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

Figure 3. Corgan & Moore Ad, *Box Office Magazine*, March 4, 1939 (Internet Archive, <https://archive.org>)



**Son!—Corgan & Moore Drew These Theatre Plans!**

—don't use your saw and hammer until you understand them.

The experienced contractor and builder cautions the young craftsman to go by the plans. He knows the only way an Exhibitor can get what he really wants in a theatre **IS** to go by the plans.

He knows also from experience that "the saw and hammer man" is not qualified to do a first-class theatre job.

The Modern Theatre, he says, complete and efficient in all its departments, must originate on the architect's drafting board—and that's reasonable.

The Theatre Architect and Theatre Owner consult on basic ideas. The Theatre Architect details those ideas. The Saw and Hammer Man carries them out.

Every architecturally built or remodeled theatre we have done is paying the required dividends. We know that because we have followed them thru after completion.

**Don't Risk Your Modern Theatre with the Saw and Hammer Man!**  
Let Experienced Theatre Architects Handle the Job.

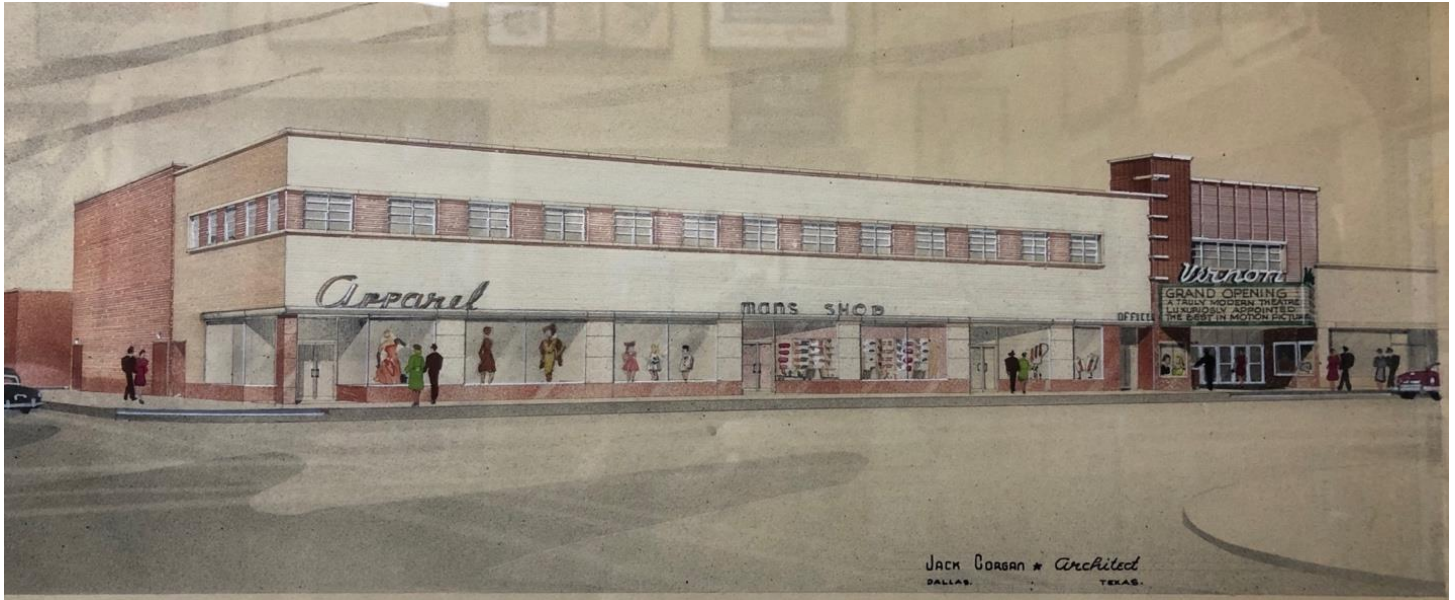
*In the Southwest, these Architects are—*

**CORGAN & MOORE**  
*Theatre Architects*  
DALLAS GAS BLDG DALLAS, TEXAS  
NOTHING TOO SMALL — NOTHING TOO LARGE  
'ON FILM ROW'

Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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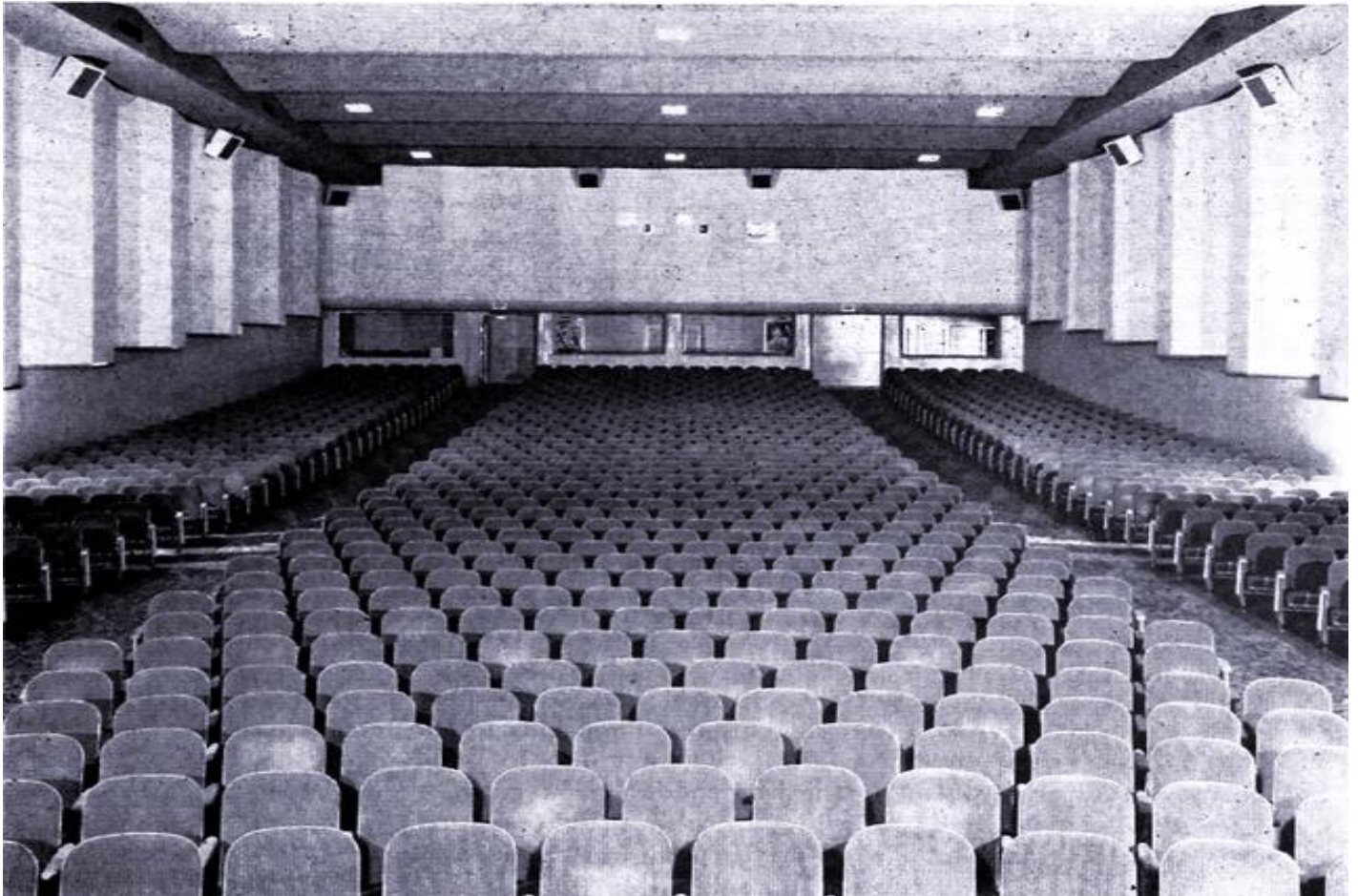
Figure 4. Original Plaza Theater and commercial block sketch by architect Jack Corgan, Ca. 1952 (Courtesy Wilbarger County Historical Museum, photographed by Steph McDougal, November 3, 2021). The narrow band of windows, unadorned planes of brick, and lack of cornice, is exemplary of the Postwar Moderne style.



Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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Figure 5. Original auditorium of the Plaza Theater, view from the screen, facing south, date unknown (Corgan Dallas)





Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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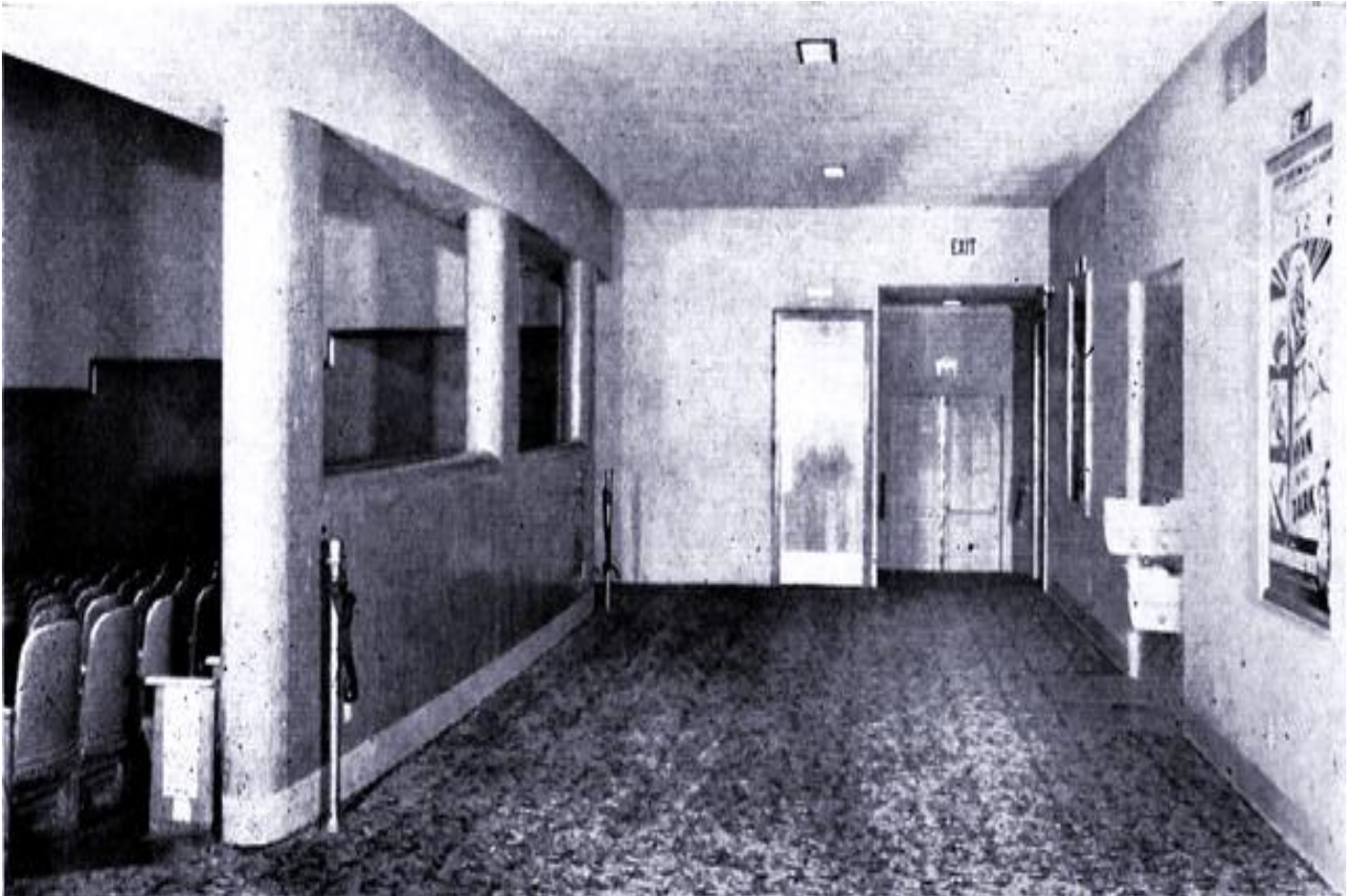
Figure 6. View from rear of the Plaza Theater auditorium looking toward the stage with curtains which extend onto the side walls on both sides of the stage, camera facing north (*Box Office Magazine*, July 7, 1956)



Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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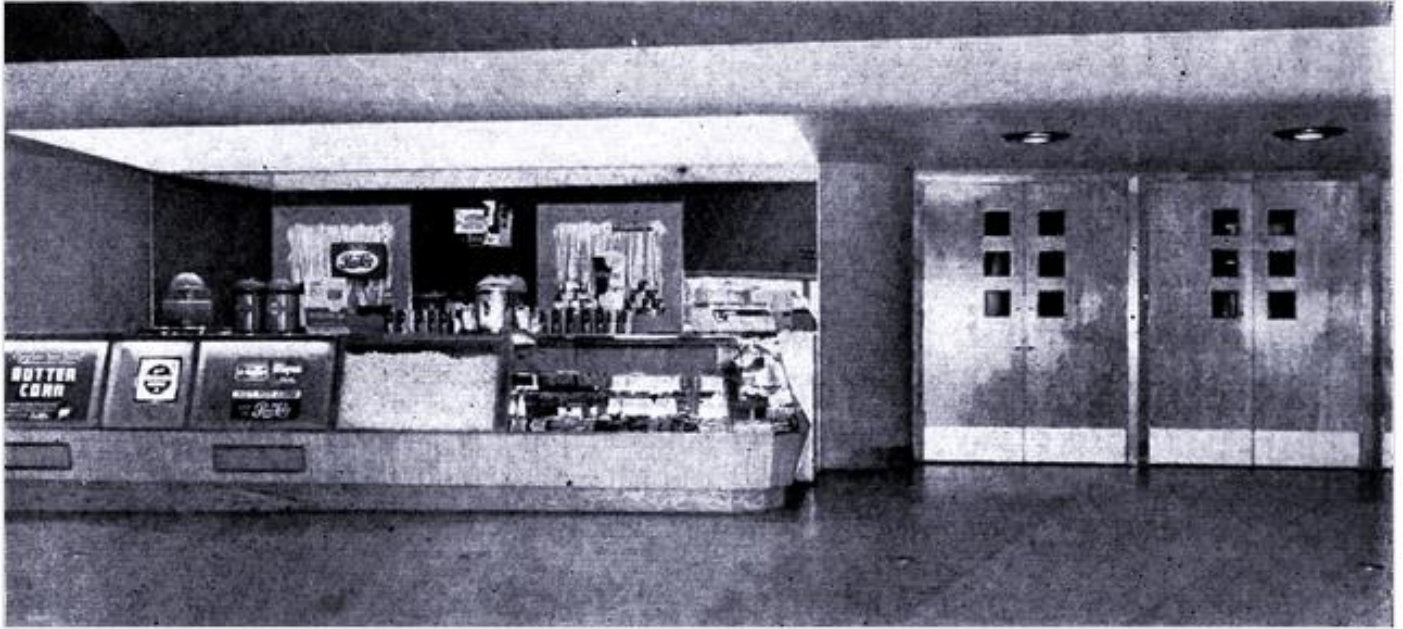
Figure 7. Auditorium lobby, facing the entrance to the cry room, camera facing east, date unknown (Corgan Dallas)



Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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Figure 8. Concession Stand, camera facing east, ca. 1953 (Cinema Treasures, cinematreasures.org)





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Figure 9. Front façade of the Plaza Theater, 1953, camera facing east (Corgan Dallas)



Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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Figure 10. Sonny and Cher in front of the Plaza Theater for the premiere of their movie *Good Times*, ca. 1967(Allison Crook, Cinema Treasures, cinematreasures.org)



Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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Figure 11. Movie premiere at the Plaza Theater for *Copters and Cows*, filmed at the Waggoner Ranch in Vernon, 1956, camera facing east (Wilbarger County Historical Museum)

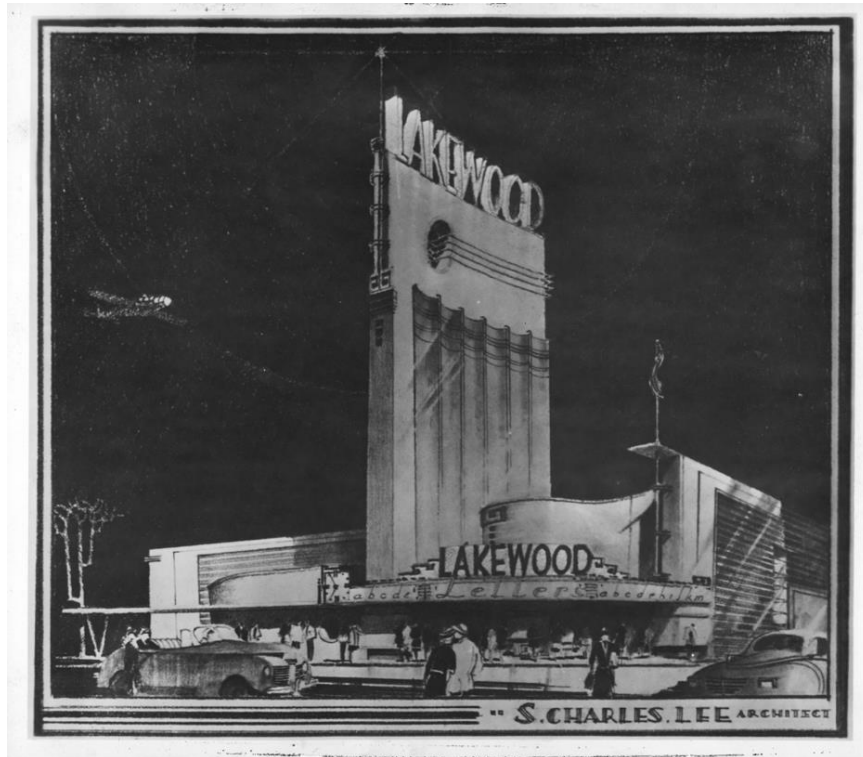


Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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*Examples of Postwar Moderne Movie Theaters*

Figure 11. S. Charles Lee sketch of the Lakewood Theater and a Ca. 1945 photo of the theater (S. Charles Lee Papers, 1919-1962, University of California, Los Angeles, Library Special Collections)





Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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*Moderne Movie Theaters by Corgan*

Figure 12. The Campus Theatre in Stillwell, Oklahoma, Ca. 1941 (Gateway to Oklahoma History, gateway.okhistory.org)



Figure 13. The Cavern Theater in Carlsbad, New Mexico, date unknown (Cinema Treasures, cinematreasures.org )



Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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*Moderne Movie Theaters by Corgan*

Figure 14. The Westwood Theatre, Ca. 1966 (Cinema Treasures, cinematreasures.org)



Figure 15. Park Forest Theatre: Park Forest front façade, date unknown (Cinema Treasures, cinematreasures.org)



Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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*Photographs*

**Photo 1**

West (Front façade) elevation. Camera facing east.





Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 2**

Marquee and entrance, camera facing northeast.





Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 3**

Theater corner detail, camera facing south.



Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 4**

Streetscape with Plaza Theater, corner of Cumberland St. and Wilbarger St., camera facing northeast.



Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 5**

West (Front façade) and south elevations. Camera facing northeast.





Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 6**

South and east elevations. Camera facing north.



Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 7**

South and east elevations. Camera facing northwest.



Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 8**

East elevation, camera facing southwest.





Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 9**

North elevation, camera facing southwest, includes north elevation of commercial block.



Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 10**

Attached commercial block, north elevation, camera facing south.





Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 11**

Commercial block northwest corner, camera facing southeast.



Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 12**

Commercial block, 1711 and 1713 Cumberland Street, camera facing southeast.





Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 13**

Commercial block, 1711 & 1713 Cumberland Street with Plaza front façade, camera facing southeast.



Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 14**

Commercial block with section of Plaza marquee and tower, camera facing northeast.





Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 15**

Ticket window, camera facing northeast.



Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 16**

Front façade tile detail, camera facing east.





Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 17**

Lobby, concession stand, camera facing northeast.





Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 18**

Lobby, concession stand front view, camera facing east.



Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 19**

Lobby facing main entrance and exit doors, camera facing west.





Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 20**

Concession stand detail, camera facing east.



Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 21**

Auditorium east, camera facing direction north.



Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 22**

Auditorium west, camera facing direction north.



Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 23**

Cry room sign, camera facing east.





Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 24**

Cry room, camera facing northeast.





Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 25**

East exit doors, auditorium lobby, camera facing east.



Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 26**

Theater stairway to second floor, camera facing east.





Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 27**

Under the staircase, marquee letter storage, camera facing northwest.



Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 28**

Theater second floor office, camera facing northeast.





Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 29**

Theater second floor library, camera facing north.



Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 30**

Projection equipment in auditorium lobby, camera facing southeast.





Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 31**

Theater digital projector, camera facing northeast.



Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 32**

Theater projection room detail, camera facing south.





Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 33**

Second floor residence living room, camera facing southeast.



Plaza Theater, Vernon, Wilbarger County, Texas

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**Photo 34**

Streetscape, Wilbarger County Courthouse facing the Plaza Theater across Cumberland St., at the intersection of Cumberland St. and Wilbarger St., camera facing north.



- end -